

# Lights of 'Irfán

Studies in the Principal Bahá'í Beliefs

*Papers Presented at the  
'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars*



Book Fourteen



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*My holy, My divinely ordained Revelation may be likened unto an ocean in whose depths are concealed innumerable pearls of great price, of surpassing luster. It is the duty of every seeker to bestir himself and strive to attain the shores of this ocean, so that he may, in proportion to the eagerness of his search and the efforts he hath exerted, partake of such benefits as have been pre-ordained in God's irrevocable and hidden Tablets. If no one be willing to direct his steps towards its shores, if every one should fail to arise and find Him, can such a failure be said to have robbed this ocean of its power or to have lessened, to any degree, its treasures? How vain, how contemptible, are the imaginations which your hearts have devised, and are still devising! O My servants! The one true God is My witness! This most great, this fathomless and surging Ocean is near, astonishingly near, unto you. Behold it is closer to you than your life-vein! Swift as the twinkling of an eye ye can, if ye but wish it, reach and partake of this imperishable favor, this God-given grace, this incorruptible gift, this most potent and unspeakably glorious bounty.*

— Bahá'u'lláh

*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* CLIII



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## Preface

Encouraging, promoting, and supporting deeper and systematic studies in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and the fundamental principles of the belief system of the Bahá'í Faith are the main aim and objective of the 'Irfán Colloquium and its publications. According to the exhortation of Bahá'u'lláh such studies are the duty of every seeker.

*Know thou that he is truly learned who hath acknowledged My Revelation, and drunk from the Ocean of My knowledge. [TAB 207-208]*

*My holy, My divinely ordained Revelation may be likened unto an ocean in whose depths are concealed innumerable pearls of great price, of surpassing luster. It is the duty of every seeker to bestir himself and strive to attain the shores of this ocean, so that he may, in proportion to the eagerness of his search and the efforts he hath exerted, partake of such benefits as have been pre-ordained in God's irrevocable and hidden Tablets. [GWB CLIII]*

'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to such studies and research as divine blessing:

*All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight. Man is ever partaking of these fruits. All other blessings are temporary; this is an everlasting possession. [PUP 50]*

The 'Irfán Colloquium is also an attempt to encourage and support studies aimed at correlating Bahá'í teachings with intellectual schools of thought, the scientific perspective,

various religious traditions and current challenges in human society, as advised and strongly recommended by Shoghi Effendi:

The Cause [the Bahá'í Faith] needs more Bahá'í scholars, people who not only are devoted to it and believe in it and are anxious to tell others about it, but also who have a deep grasp of the Teachings and their significance, and who can correlate its beliefs with the current thoughts and problems of the people of the world.<sup>1</sup>

and again:

We need Bahá'í scholars, not only people far, far more deeply aware of what our teachings really are, but also well-read and well-educated people, capable of correlating our teachings to the current thoughts of the leaders of society. We Bahá'ís should, in other words, arm our minds with knowledge in order to better demonstrate to, especially, the educated classes, the truths enshrined in our Faith. We Bahá'ís should, in other words, arm our minds with knowledge in order to better demonstrate to, especially, the educated classes, the truths enshrined in our Faith.<sup>2</sup>

'Irfán Colloquia are annually held in English, Persian and German languages in North America and Europe. *Lights of 'Irfán* is an annual publication containing a selection of the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia conducted in English or articles contributed for publication.

The present volume includes an exegesis of certain concepts, terminologies, or texts, as well as presentation of new approaches in the studies of the Bahá'í Writings and the fundamental belief system of the Faith.

**“Yín-yáng Cosmology and the Bahá'í Faith”** is a presentation focusing on a pivotal theory in traditional Chinese thought, influencing many aspects of Chinese worldview (Weltanschauung<sup>3</sup>). The ever-increasing and expansion of the occasions of the encounter between the Chinese culture and the

Bahá'í Faith calls for better understanding of the fundamental principles or framework of the ideas dominating Chinese worldview and correlating it with the Bahá'í worldview. It is an attempt to discuss the impact of the similarities in the modern encounter between the Chinese culture and the Bahá'í Faith.

**“Reason and the Bahá'í Writings”** is an exploration of one of the fundamental teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. “If religion were contrary to logical reason,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, “then it would cease to be a religion and be merely a tradition” [SAQ 7]. The paper explains what the Writings say about reason, its proper uses, and limitations. It also strives to resolve an apparent contradiction in what the Writings assert about reason. This investigation considers new concepts used in the Bahá'í Writings such as “rational God” and “rational soul.” In addition, it discusses some controversies surrounding the topic of reason in the Writings, among them cultural differences and logic and the resulting cultural politics.

**“Role of Principles in the Bahá'í Faith: Principles and Fashion”** is an attempt to systematically explore and answer the following questions: Are moral laws and values relative or absolute? Is living according to long-established moral values old-fashioned? How did past religions fall into ritualistic imitations? Should we be more conservative or progressive? And more generally, what do we believe in? Why do we believe in it? Should our beliefs change over time? It presents a hierarchical or tree-like model of the world including two tree structures each having nodes and links defining multiple levels of organization: a system tree (specific to general) and a type tree (general to specific).

**“Celestial Fire: Bahá'u'lláh as the Messianic Theophany of the Divine Fire in Zoroastrianism”** examines the mystico-messianic hermeneutics of Bahá'u'lláh in which He enunciates Himself to be the theophanic appearance of the Zoroastrian Divine Fire (*átar*) in person in light of some of the relevant material from the Gatha (the earliest Zoroastrian texts which are considered to be the Prophet's own words), and other Zoroastrian sources that point to this eschatological expectation. Also, it briefly outlines some of the relevant history of the transference of this motif of the Zoroastrian Fire



into early Greek philosophy, Judaism, Christianity, Arabic Hermetical Alchemy and Islamic philosophy.

**“These Four States Conferred Upon Thee”<sup>4</sup>: Tetrarchic Thinking in Philosophy, Theology and Psychology**” is discussed in relation to frequent references to four-fold relationships such as *“Firstness and Lastness – Inwardness and Outwardness”* [SVFV 27]; *“Motion and Stillness – Will and Purpose”* [GWB 164] and several others in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings. It attempts to show how these fourfold principles we call “tetrarchies” are a new way of thinking about humankind and the entire universe. It is significant that all these statements originated during the early periods of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation which means that they are to be understood in a mystical context. It should be noted that the word “Tetrarchy” is not mentioned, as such, in any enumeration of Bahá'u'lláh's principles, yet, it is the writer's opinion that this idea presents a new way of thinking. This concept describes a new pattern of thought, a new basic hermeneutical and ontological principle permeating the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

**“Commentary on a Passage in the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*”** presents a brief account of the historical background of Bahá'u'lláh's *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* and the two external references mentioned in that passage, namely the Báb's *Qayyumu'l-Asmá'* and the Islamic prayer of Ramadan. It explores the meanings and connotations of certain expressions or terminologies in the two references such as “Crimson Arc,” “people of Bahá” as companions of that Arc, “Ism Alláh-Al-A`zam” or “Bahá” (Splendor), “Bahíyyih,” and “Abhá.”

On the occasion of the centenary of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's history-making and extensive visit to North America, and His numerous public talks there, a number of presentations made at the 'Irfán Colloquia during 2012 were related to that visit and those talks. Three articles in this volume are related to those events and some of the concepts promoted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during that visit.

**“'Abdu'l-Bahá in Egypt: early September 1910 – 5 December 1913”** is an extensive and well documented chronicle of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discontinuous sojourns in Egypt

from early September 1910 to 5 December 1913. It presents a historical and political background for His time there, provides brief descriptions of Egyptian cities and towns visited by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, mentions the members of the Holy Family who visited Him in Egypt, outlines public opinion reaction and the press coverage, and lists several important personages who met Him.

**“Abdu'l-Bahá's Elucidation of the Concept of the Oneness of Humanity, During His Western Travels”** looks at 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation of the central teaching of the Bahá'í Faith, (the principle of the oneness of humankind) in His talks in the West, primarily in the United States, and through His own actions.

**“Collective Security: An Indispensable Requisite for A Lasting Peace”** discusses the principle of collective security as adumbrated by Bahá'u'lláh and elaborated upon by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as a prerequisite for a lasting peace. It explores the principles of such a collective security and the range of steps that the international community needs to take for its establishment. It also makes concrete recommendations for the application of these broad principles in a manner that is actionable and politically palatable in today's world.

Although 'Irfán Colloquium programs and publications do not include historical research and studies, as an exception and due to the unique personal connection of the author, an article related to the historical memoirs, **“Eyewitness Account of the Massacre of Bahá'ís in Nayriz – Naw Ruz 1909,”** is published in this volume.

The Elucidations section in the *Lights of 'Irfán* includes letters written by or on behalf of the Universal House of Justice or documents that have been issued by the Bahá'í World Centre concerning clarification or elaboration of specific subjects related to the aims and purposes of the 'Irfán Colloquium and its publications. In this volume, the Elucidations section includes the message of the Universal House of Justice dated 29 December 1988 on **“Individual Rights and Freedom”** addressed to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the United States of America. This message includes guidance on a number of topics of concern to Bahá'í scholars.

Appendix I is the “Bibliography of Bahá’í Writings and Their Abbreviated titles” used in the text of the papers published in this book, to facilitate referring to the sources of the quoted statements. Appendix II, “Contents of Previous Volumes of *Lights of 'Irfán*,” provides a list of the contents of previous volumes. It also shows the range, types, methodological approaches and scope of the papers that are presented and are welcome to be presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia. In addition to the papers presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia, research papers related to the main goals of the 'Irfán Colloquium are welcome to be directly submitted for publication in the *Lights of 'Irfán*.

Starting with Book Six we have made two changes to the 'Irfán Colloquia’s style guide. All “authoritative” publications are cited by an abbreviation; see Appendix II, “Bibliography of the Bahá’í Writings and Their Abbreviations Used in This Book.” Words of Prophets/Manifestations, i.e. quotations from Sacred Writings, (not including statements by Shoghi Effendi or the Universal House of Justice), are italicized.

All papers published in this book, present the views and understanding of their authors. The texts of the papers are published as provided by the authors. Their writing styles and scholarly approaches are therefore different. Articles are published in this volume according to the alphabetical order of the author’s surnames.

Iraj Ayman

Chicago, March 2013

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<sup>1</sup> From the letter of 21 October 1943 to an individual believer

<sup>2</sup> From the letter of 5 July 1949 to an individual believer

<sup>3</sup> *Weltanschauung* is a German word composed of *Welt* ('world') and *Anschaung* ('view' or 'outlook'). It is a concept fundamental to German philosophy and epistemology and refers to a *wide world perception*. Additionally, it refers to the framework of ideas and beliefs through which an individual, group or culture interprets the world and interacts with it.

<sup>4</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and Four Valleys*.