

# Memorials of the Faithful:

## The Democratization of Sainthood

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This paper considers the literary genre and literary history behind *Memorials of the Faithful* (*Tadhkiratu'l-Vafá*) as well as examining what is new about the book. The paper will first consider the genre of hagiography in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It will then look at the specific literary precedent set by Farídu'd-Dín's *Tadhkiratu'l-Awliyá* (Memorials of the Saints), which is the oldest work of this genre in Persian. Next, it looks at the contents of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's book, giving some examples of the manner in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá follows the hagiographic tradition and where he departs from it; in particular where he highlights particular virtues that related to the needs of the Faith. Finally the paper will examine the manner in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá took this traditional literary format and used it in an innovative manner to make a profound statement about a fundamental principle of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

### Hagiography in the World's Religions

Throughout religious history, there has been a desire to portray the holy figures of each religion both as a way of pointing to the power of that religion to transform lives—thus

often the holy person is portrayed as living an evil and immoral life before conversion and then being transformed by their new religion—and also as a way of providing specific examples of the sorts of virtues and lives of detachment and service that are the ideals of that religion. In most religions, there has therefore developed a genre of literature called hagiography—the writing of the lives of holy people (saints).

Hagiography has been one of the main genres of religious literature over many centuries. Hinduism has a vast range of hagiographical literature with each of the numerous religious traditions within Hinduism having its own list of saints. Indeed there are many words that are used across the spectrum of Hinduism to denote what would in English be called a saint, including *sadhu*, *siddha*, *nayanmars*, *bhagat*. There are thus many hagiographies coming from each of the various traditions in Hinduism. A representative title from two of these traditions can be mentioned: from the Tamil Shaiva tradition, there is Sekkhizhar's *Tiruthondar Puranam* (also known as the *Periapuranam*), which portrays the lives of 63 Tamil Shaiva devotees (Nayanmars); from the Varkari Vaishnava tradition, there is the *Bhaktavijay* of Mahipati, which in the course of recounting the life of Namdev, a 12<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century poet-saint, also recounts the lives of early saints.<sup>1</sup>

Buddhism also has its hagiographic literature with many books written about boddhisatva and siddhas (in the Tibetan tradition). For example, Abhayadatta's lives of 84 Siddhas has been translated into English as *Buddha's Lions* (translated by James Robinson).<sup>2</sup>

In Judaism, medieval Jewish scholars wrote hagiographies both of figures from Biblical times and about contemporary figures. In Christianity, hagiographies were used in the commemoration of saints days in both the Orthodox and Catholic traditions.

In Islam, hagiographic accounts were written of many prophets and of the important figures from early Islamic

history. In Sufism in particular, hagiography was one of the main ways of inculcating the ideal of Sufi sainthood. The word used to convey the sense of saint in Islam is usually *walí* (plural *awliyá*). This word however has a range of meanings, among which are authority, guardianship, patronage, protection, friendship, companionship, spiritual guidance and sanctity. While in Islam, there is a concept, as indeed there is in hagiographic literature in general, of a hierarchy of holiness with the saint at the apex, there are some nuances to this that are of particular interest to a theme that is discussed at the end of this paper. For example, in writings of Ibn ‘Arabí, while he subscribes to the concept of a hierarchy of holiness and indeed he names various levels of saints, there is also the idea in his writings that the most noble and accomplished of these saints, the friends of God, are also unknown, anonymous and inconspicuous.<sup>3</sup>

As would be expected, the hagiography of each religion emphasizes those qualities that are considered to be of particular value in that religious tradition. Thus for example, the saints portrayed in the above-mentioned *Tiruthondar Puranam* of Sekkizhar are portrayed as being completely devoted to the Lord Shiva; the theme of devotion and worship is a strong one in the Bhakti tradition in which this book lies. Some polemical elements also enters these stories since one of the saints in this book is a convert from Buddhism and another a convert from Jainism. Other Hindu accounts emphasize the austerities and self-mortification that the saint has undergone, which is also considered an important marker of devoutness. The Buddhist hagiographies emphasize the theme of compassion which is important to the Buddhist tradition.

Western readers sometimes complain that hagiographies present an idealized and unreal picture of the saint portrayed. But that only betrays a lack of understanding of what hagiography is about. Hagiography is not biography. The details of how the saint ate and drank and slept, details of their home, even their date of birth and death is of no interest to the

hagiographer. What is important to the hagiographer is the inner life of the saint, not the outer details. What is of interest to the hagiographer is the inner struggle that the saints went through, how low they went at first in their moral and spiritual life, the event that caused the change in direction, and the heights that they rose to after this, what moral and spiritual qualities they exhibited in their lives.

One particular feature of hagiographies is that the saints depicted often come from poor and disempowered backgrounds as well as the rich and powerful, they often include women as well as men, and this within societies and religious traditions, which are usually strongly hierarchical and patriarchal, where the formal positions at the head of government and the religion are held by rich and powerful men. Secular histories and biographies and even church histories have all tended to be about powerful men, but hagiographies also include a sprinkling of the poor, the disempowered and women.

Whatever the background of the saints depicted in the hagiographies of the various religious traditions, however debauched or evil their early life may have been, the hagiography describes their rise to spiritual greatness. At the end, one is given the impression that this was no ordinary human being; this was a spiritual giant. Often this point is emphasized by recounting miracles performed by these saints either during their lifetimes or by their graves or relics or by calling upon them after their deaths.

### **‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Authorship of *Memorials of the Faithful***

During the First World War, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was relatively much more cut off from the rest of the world than at other times. This meant that he did not have the mountain of correspondence from Bahá’ís from all parts of the world coming in, that overwhelmed him at other times. One result of this lessening of his correspondence workload was that he produced

the important *Tablets of the Divine Plan* in the latter half of the First World War. Another is *Memorials of the Faithful*. This is not a book that he wrote but rather a collection of discourses of his which, according to the Introduction of the first edition of the work, can be dated to 1915, at the start of the First World War. Just before the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Áqá Muḥammad Husayn ‘Alí Akbaroff, known as Kahruba’i (because he worked on the electrical lighting of the holy shrines in Haifa and Bahji) sought and obtained from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá permission to publish this work. The grief of the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Kahruba’i’s preoccupation with his lighting project, delayed publication until 1924, when it was eventually published with an introduction written by Nuru’d-Din Zayn as secretary of the Haifa Spiritual Assembly and with the seal of that assembly appended, stating that permission for this publication had been sought from and given by Shoghi Effendi. It was published by the Matba‘at al-‘Abbasiyyah in Haifa.

The title of this collection of talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tadhkiratu’l-Vafá, Memorials of the Faithful*, places it firmly within the literary genre of hagiography. We can be sure that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was fully aware and deliberate in choosing a title that resonated so strongly with the leading work of Sufi hagiography in the Persian literary tradition, Faridu’d-Dín ‘Aṭṭár’s *Tadhkiratu’l-Awliyá* (Memorials of the Saints). Both works are in prose. ‘Aṭṭár’s work gives short accounts of 38 prominent Sufis from the past; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s work gives short accounts of some 79 Babís and Bahá’ís, all of whom had died by the time the discourses were given. The accounts bring the individual being memorialized to life by recording anecdotes about them; although ‘Aṭṭár, whose individual accounts are longer than ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s, tends to do this more.

The English translation (by Marzieh Gail) of *Memorials of the Faithful* has a slight difference from the Persian published original (in 1924). The Persian original contains 68 chapters, whereas the English has 69. This is because the Persian original combines the biographies of Abu’l-Qásim of Sultanabad and

Áqá Faraj into one chapter. In addition, the original Persian publication has a prayer or tablet of visitation “*He is God! Thou seest, O my Lord, the assemblage of my loved ones ... the Bestower, the Forgiver, the All-Merciful*” placed after the section on Shams-i-Ḍuhá as indeed does the first edition (1971) of the English translation. However, the prayer is clearly about the previous entry, the “Consort of the King of Martyrs”. The 1997 edition of the English translation of *Memorials of the Faithful* and the online edition of the English translation of *Memorials of the Faithful*<sup>4</sup> have the prayer in the correct place, after the Consort of the King of Martyrs.

### **Continuities and Discontinuities in *Memorials of the Faithful***

In many ways *Memorials of the Faithful* is a continuation of the tradition of hagiography, but there are some important discontinuities also. The continuities will be listed first and then a more detailed consideration of the discontinuities will be undertaken, since it is the discontinuities that are of more interest.

Among the continuities are:

1. That many of the persons chosen for these memorializations are from poor and disempowered backgrounds, indicating that even persons from humble background can aspire to a high spiritual station. Among the 84 Mahasiddhas in Abhayadatta’s Buddhist hagiography are individuals whose backgrounds include being a beggar, washerman and fisherman; and in Islamic hagiographies, there are slaves and even criminals. The 79 people memorialized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can be divided into two groups, some five or six individuals who were clearly among the first rank of Bahá’ís and who were honoured with designations such as Letter of the Living (Táhirih), Hands of the Cause (Ḥájí ‘Alí Akbar Sháhmírzádí, Ismu’lláh al-Asdaq, Nabíl-i Akbar), Apostles of Bahá’u’lláh (Áqá Músá Kalím, Mishkín Qalam, Nabíl-i A’zam),

and possibly also the Trustee of the Huqúqu'lláh (Sháh-Muḥammad Amín) and the rest who were ordinary Bahá'ís, some of them in very humble positions of service, including servants and janitors.

2. Among the individuals memorialized in these hagiographies, there are often a handful of women, thus indicating that holiness is even capable of transcending the norms of the patriarchal power structure that prohibited women from becoming Buddhist nuns or Christian priests. Abhayadatta's Buddhist hagiography includes four women among the 85 Mahasiddhas he memorializes. Alban Butler's *Lives of Saints* (published between 1756 and 1759) includes some three or four women saints among the saints allocated for each month of the year; most Islamic hagiographies, including 'Aṭṭár's *Tadhkiratu'l-Awliyá*, include at least one woman Sufi saint, Rábi'ah al-'Adawiyyah. *Memorials of the Faithful* includes three women among the 79 people memorialized.

The discontinuities that can be seen in *Memorials of the Faithful* are of interest:

1. In the standard hagiographical accounts there is a tendency to emphasize a moment of transformation, whether this the Buddhist awakening or the Christian conversion. This is seen as a critical moment in a saint's life; everything before this moment, is secular, unimportant or, in many cases, portrays a life of sin and human weaknesses; everything after this moment is transformed with the saint now a model of that religion's virtues. *Memorials of the Faithful* rarely mentions let alone emphasizes the conversion experience despite the fact that almost all those depicted are converts. Instead, most of the emphasis is on the transformation that occurs after conversion. This is of importance in that the Bahá'í idea of salvation involves not just recognition of the Manifestation of God for one's age (the conversion experience), but rather also following the laws and teachings of that Manifestation. Bahá'u'lláh rejects the idea that one can enter a state of Grace just by affirmation

of one's belief and thus become one of God's elect (the Christian Protestant view); one also has to tread a path of obedience to the law and teachings:

*The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behoveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration. [KA v. 1]*

2. In the standard works of hagiography, there tends to be an emphasis on miracles performed by the holy person or by the relics of that person as evidence of their high spiritual state. Indeed the assumption is that being able to perform miracles is a function of sainthood. Numerous stories of miracles performed by the saint are told as well as stories of miracles performed by their relics or by praying for their intercession with God. Indeed, the Catholic church makes miracles a condition for sainthood; it requires evidence of two confirmed miracles brought about by praying to a person to intercede with God for that person to be declared a saint.

*Memorials of the Faithful* appears to discount miracles altogether. Miracles do not form the centre-piece of any of the stories of those memorialized. This is in keeping with the attitude towards miracles in other areas of Bahá'í discourse. Bahá'u'lláh constantly argued against miracles being a sign of a Manifestation of God (as many of the people in his time thought); he resisted calls on him to perform evidentiary



miracles (although he did accede to such requests on a few occasions when he knew those making the request would never agree on the miracle to be performed nor on their obligation to recognize him if he succeeded) and he tried to dissuade his followers from recounting his miracles.

## Highlighting Virtues—General

In *Memorials of the Faithful*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá highlighted a number of virtues that are to be found in hagiographies in general, and some that are more specific to the Bahá’í Faith. He also uses the text to describe the nature of the path towards perfection. Among the virtues that can be found in hagiographies in general, there are:

1. Sacrifice and detachment. Several of the stories in *Memorials of the Faithful* portray this theme. Among these is the story of Ustád Ismá‘íl Banna. When he became a Bahá’í, his employer, Farrukh Khán Amínu’d-Dawlih protected him for a time but when this became impossible, he advised him to leave the country. “*Composed, happy, Ustád gave up his work, closed his eyes to his possessions, and left for Iraq, where he lived in poverty.*” But even that was not the end of the sacrifices he would have to make for the Faith. “*He had recently taken a bride, and loved her beyond measure. Her mother arrived, and by subterfuge, obtained his permission to conduct the daughter back to Ṭíhrán, supposedly for a visit. As soon as she reached Kirmansháh, she went to the mujtahid, and told him that because her son-in-law had abandoned his religion, her daughter could not remain his lawful wife. The mujtahid arranged a divorce, and wedded the girl to another man.*” But, to highlight his detachment, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reports that “*When word of this reached Baghdad, Ismá‘íl, steadfast as ever, only laughed. ‘God be praised!’ he said. ‘Nothing is left me on this pathway. I have lost everything, including my bride. I have been able to give Him all I possessed.’*” [MF 28-29] See also the story of Pidar Ján of Qazvín.

2. Radiance and certitude. Regarding Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí Afnán, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*What a radiant face he had! He was nothing but light from head to foot. Just to look at that face made one happy; he was so confident, so assured, so rooted in his faith, and his expression so joyous. He was truly a blessed being. He was a man who made progress day by day, who added, every day, to his certitude and faith, his luminous quality, his ardent love. [MF 17]*

3. Thankfulness. Regarding Muḥammad ‘Alí Iṣfahání, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*Muḥammad-‘Alí would carefully consider every blessing that came his way. “How delicious my tea is today,” he would comment. “What perfume, what color! How lovely this meadow is, and the flowers so bright!” He used to say that everything, even air and water, had its own special fragrance. For him the days passed in indescribable delight. Even kings were not so happy as this old man, the people said. “He is completely free of the world,” they would declare. “He lives in joy.” It also happened that his food was of the very best, and that his home was situated in the very best part of ‘Akká. Gracious God! Here he was, a prisoner, and yet experiencing comfort, peace and joy. [MF 25]*

4. Contentment. In the account about Mírzá Mahmúd Káshání and Áqá Ridá Qannad, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

*There was in Baghdad a company of seven leading believers who lived in a single, small room, because they were destitute. They could hardly keep body and soul together, but they were so spiritual, so blissful, that they thought themselves in Heaven. Sometimes they would chant prayers all night long, until the day broke. Days, they would go out to work, and by nightfall one would*

*have earned ten paras, another perhaps twenty paras, others forty or fifty. These sums would be spent for the evening meal. On a certain day one of them made twenty paras, while the rest had nothing at all. The one with the money bought some dates, and shared them with the others; that was dinner, for seven people. They were perfectly content with their frugal life, supremely happy.*  
[MF 40]

5. True seeking. This matter is dealt with in several places. Regarding Mírzá Muḥammad Işfahání, the servant at the Travelers' Hospice in 'Akká, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*This youth of God was from Işfahán, and from an early age was known to its leading divines for his excellent mind. He was of gentle birth, his family was known and respected, and he was an accomplished scholar. He had profited from philosophy and history alike, from sciences and arts, but he thirsted after the secret of reality, and longed for knowledge of God. His feverish thirst was not allayed by the arts and sciences, however limpid those waters. He kept on seeking, seeking, carrying on debates in gatherings of learned men until at last he discovered the meaning of his longing dream, and the enigma, the inviolable secret, lay open before him. Suddenly he caught the scent of fresh flowers from the gardens of the splendor of God, and his heart was ashine with a ray from the Sun of Truth. Whereas before, he was like a fish taken from the water, now he had come to the wellspring of eternal life; before, he was a questing moth; now he had found the candle flame. A true seeker after truth, he was instantly revived by the supreme Glad Tidings; his heart's eye was brightened by the new dawn of guidance. So blinding was the fire of Divine love that he turned his face away from his life, its peace, its blessings, and set out for the Most Great Prison. [MF 106]*

6. True knowledge. Regarding Hájí Muḥammad Khán Baluch, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*Far and wide, he carried on his search. He would speak to everyone he met. But what he longed for was the sweet scent of the love of God, and this he was unable to detect in anyone, whether Gnostic or philosopher, or member of the Shaykhi sect. All he could see in the dervishes was their tufted beards, and their palms-up religion of beggary. They were “dervish”—poor in all save God—in name only; all they cared about, it seemed to him, was whatever came to hand. Nor did he find illumination among the Illuminati; he heard nothing from them but idle argument. He observed that their grandiloquence was not eloquence and that their subtleties were but windy figures of speech. Truth was not there; the core of inner meaning was absent. For true philosophy is that which produces rewards of excellence, and among these learned men there was no such fruit to be found; at the peak of their accomplishment, they became the slaves of vice, led an unconcerned life and were given over to personal characteristics that were deserving of blame. To him, of all that constitutes the high, distinguishing quality of humankind, they were devoid. [MF 90]*

7. Honesty and trustworthiness. Regarding Hájí ‘Alí-Akbar Tabrízí, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*Then he took a little merchandise with him from Adrianople, and left for the city of Jum‘ih-Bázár, to earn his livelihood. What he had with him was trifling, but still, it was carried off by thieves. When the Persian Consul learned of this he presented a document to the Government, naming an enormous sum as the value of the stolen goods. By chance the thieves were caught and proved to be in possession of considerable funds. It was*

*decided to investigate the case. The Consul called in Ḥájí Alí-'Askar and told him: "These thieves are very rich. In my report to the Government, I wrote that the amount of the theft was great. Therefore you must attend the trial and testify conformably to what I wrote."*

*The Ḥájí replied: "Your Honor, Khán, the stolen goods amounted to very little. How can I report something that is not true? When they question me, I will give the facts exactly as they are. I consider this my duty, and only this."*

*"Ḥájí," said the Consul, "We have a golden opportunity here; you and I can both profit by it. Don't let such a once-in-a-lifetime chance slip through your hands."*

*The Ḥájí answered: "Khán, how would I square it with God? Let me be. I shall tell the truth and nothing but the truth."*

*The Consul was beside himself. He began to threaten and belabor Alí-'Askar. "Do you want to make me out a liar?" he cried. "Do you want to make me a laughingstock? I will jail you; I will have you banished; there is no torment I will spare you. This very instant I will hand you over to the police, and I will tell them that you are an enemy of the state, and that you are to be manacled and taken to the Persian frontier."*

*The Ḥájí only smiled. "Jináb-i-Khán," he said. "I have given up my life for the truth. I have nothing else. You are telling me to lie and bear false witness. Do with me as you please; I will not turn my back on what is right."*

*When the Consul saw that there was no way to make Alí-'Askar testify to a falsehood, he said: "It is better, then, for you to leave this place, so that I can inform the Government that the owner of the merchandise is no*

*longer available and has gone away. Otherwise I shall be disgraced.”*

*The Ḥájí returned to Adrianople, and spoke not a word as to his stolen goods, but the matter became public knowledge and caused considerable surprise. [MF 162]*

## Highlighting Virtues—Specific

Regarding virtues that may be seen as specific to the concerns of the Bahá’í community, the following appear to be key:

1. Teaching and how to teach. There are many examples in *Memorials of the Faithful* of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá extolling Bahá’ís who teach the Bahá’í Faith to others. In a few instances, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses the opportunity to also say a little about how to teach. Regarding Ḥájí Muḥammad Taqí Afnán, he says:

*After he had achieved the honor, in Baghdad, of meeting Bahá’u’lláh, he returned to Persia, where he proceeded to teach the Faith with an eloquent tongue. And this is how to teach: with an eloquent tongue, a ready pen, a goodly character, pleasing words, and righteous ways and deeds. Even enemies bore witness to his high-mindedness and his spiritual qualities, and they would say: “There is none to compare with this man for his words and acts, his righteousness, trustworthiness, and strong faith; in all things he is unique; what a pity that he is a Bahá’í!” That is: “What a pity that he is not as we are, perverse, uncaring, committing sins, engrossed in sensuality, the creatures of our passions!” Gracious God! They saw with their own eyes that the moment he learned of the Faith he was transformed, he was severed from the world, he began to emit rays from the Sun of Truth; and still, they failed to profit by the example he set. [MF 127]*

2. Travel teaching. The Bahá'í scriptures also extol the virtue of travelling to teach the Bahá'í Faith. In the following story from *Memorials of the Faithful*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appears to be saying that even the slightest and least successful effort (and the effort and effectiveness in this case were very slight) to spread the Bahá'í Faith will bring joy to the heart of Bahá'u'lláh:

*The Ilkhání had been a man of unlimited wealth, but he had wasted it all on the desires of the flesh. He was now destitute, to such a point that he did not even dare to step outside his house, because of the creditors waiting there to fall upon him. Bahá'u'lláh directed him to go to Umar Pasha, the Governor of Damascus, and obtain from him a letter of recommendation to Constantinople. The Ilkhání complied, and he received every assistance from the Governor of Baghdad. After utter despair, he began to hope again, and left for Constantinople. When he arrived at Diyarbakr he penned a letter on behalf of two Armenian merchants. "These two are about to leave for Baghdad," his letter said. "They have shown me every courtesy, and have also asked me for an introduction. I had no refuge or shelter except Your bounty; thus I beg of You to show them favor." The superscription, that is, the address he had written on the envelope was: "To His Eminence Bahá'u'lláh, Leader of the Bábís." The merchants presented this letter to Bahá'u'lláh at the head of the bridge, and when He inquired about it their reply was: "In Diyarbakr, the Ilkhání gave us particulars as to this Cause." Then they accompanied Him to His house.*

*When the Blessed Beauty entered the family apartments, Áqáy-i-Kalím was there to meet Him. Bahá'u'lláh cried out, "Kalím, Kalím! The fame of the Cause of God has reached as far as Diyarbakr!" And He was smiling, jubilant. [MF 89]*

3. Faithfulness to the Covenant. Regarding Sayyid Muḥammad Taqí Manshadí, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says:

*After the Daystar of the Supreme Concurrence had set, Siyyid Manshadí remained loyal to the Covenant, a sharp sword confronting the violators. They tried every ruse, every deceit, all their subtlest expedients; it is beyond imagining how they showered favors on him and what honors they paid him, what feasts they prepared, what pleasures they offered, all this to make a breach in his faith. Yet every day he grew stronger than before, continued to be staunch and true, kept free from every unseemly thought, and shunned whatever went contrary to the Covenant of God. When they finally despaired of shaking his resolve, they harassed him in every possible way, and plotted his financial ruin. He remained, however, the quintessence of constancy and trust. [MF 55]*

## The Democratization of Sainthood

What was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá trying to achieve with *Memorials of the Faithful*? Of course, one answer is to say that he wished to memorialize a number of faithful and devoted Bahá’ís who had died. It is also quite correct to affirm that he was highlighting through these biographies some of the virtues that human beings should acquire. But it is possible to speculate that there is a deeper message in this work. The Bahá’ís memorialized in this work do not have the usual characteristics of saints. They are not put up on a pedestal as beings elevated beyond the human level, as occurs in most hagiographies. Miracles and super-human powers are not attributed to them. Indeed, one gets the impression that if we were to have met and known the majority of these people, the seventy or more one who were not distinguished Bahá’ís, we would not have recognized them as being extraordinary in anyway. We would not have picked them out for memorialization.



So in effect, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was seeing in these people something we would not have seen. His message, is then perhaps firstly, that if you try, you can see the heroic in everyone, even the lowly. Much more innovative is that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá appears to be saying that it is possible for all of us to manifest saintly virtues, to achieve the rank of saint. A saint is not some extraordinary creature that is far above us. This can be called the democratization of sainthood. A saint can be just an ordinary person who has striven to acquire one or more of the Divine attributes.

Bahá’u’lláh started this process of the democratization of sainthood. In his writings, he refers to the Bahá’ís by the term “*awliyá*”, which is exactly the same term as is usually used for “saint” in Sufi literature—for example Aṭṭár’s *Tadhkiratu’l-Awliyá*—*Memorials of the Saints*. The following are just a small selection from many examples of Bahá’u’lláh referring to the generality of his followers as *awliyá*:

*We shall herewith cite a few passages from Tablets specifically revealed to this people, so that every one may know of a certainty that this Wronged One hath acted in a manner which hath been pleasing and acceptable unto men endued with insight, and unto such as are the exponents of justice and equity:*

*“O ye friends (awliyá’) of God in His cities and His loved ones in His lands! This Wronged One enjoineth on you honesty and piety. [ESW 22]*

*[In the Lawh-i-Ra’ís:] Erelong will God raise up from among the kings one who will aid His loved ones (awliyá’ihi). He, verily, encompasseth all things. He will instill in the hearts the love of His loved ones (awliyá’ihi). [Qtd. in PDC 73]*

*[Referring to Tehran:] It behoveth every one that visiteth thee to glory in thee and in them that inhabit*

*thee, that have branched from My Tree, who are the leaves thereof, who are the signs of My glory, who follow Me (awliyá'í) and are My lovers (ahibbá'í), and who, with the most mighty determination, have turned their faces in the direction of My glorious station. [GWB 122]*

*I beseech Thee, O my Lord, by the sighs of Thy lovers throughout the world, and by their lamentation in their remoteness from the court of Thy presence, and by the blood that hath been shed for love of Thee, and by the hearts that have melted in Thy path, to protect Thy loved ones (awliyá'ika) from the cruelty of such as have remained unaware of the mysteries of Thy Name, the Unconstrained. [ESW 35]*

*We have admonished Our loved ones (awliyá'iná) to fear God, a fear which is the fountain-head of all goodly deeds and virtues. [ESW 134]*

*Say: O people of God! Adorn your temples with the adornment of trustworthiness and piety. Help, then, your Lord with the hosts of goodly deeds and a praiseworthy character. We have forbidden you dissension and conflict in My Books, and My Scriptures, and My Scrolls, and My Tablets, and have wished thereby naught else save your exaltation and advancement. Unto this testify the heavens and the stars thereof, and the sun and the radiance thereof, and the trees and the leaves thereof, and the seas and the waves thereof, and the earth and the treasures thereof. We pray God to assist His loved ones (awliyá'ihí), and aid them in that which besemeth them in this blest, this mighty, and wondrous station. [ESW 135]*

Thus Bahá'u'lláh regarded all of his followers as (potentially) saints—they were all capable of manifesting the qualities of sainthood.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is thus following the precedent set by Bahá'u'lláh when he describes ordinary Bahá'is as saints (*awliyá'*). He is making sainthood applicable to and attainable by all. The condition for achieving sainthood is not an instantaneous transformation (the conversion experience) that elevates the person to a state above the rest of humanity, but rather the willingness to engage upon the task of perfecting oneself, to walk together with others along a path of selflessness and service. It is the fact of being on the path that makes one a saint—not how far along the path one has travelled.

Thus, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá can be said to have redefined a saint for the purposes of the Bahá'í Faith. A saint is not someone who has arrived at a state of perfection but someone who has engaged in the process of self-perfection, one who is prepared to walk a path towards that goal. It is the striving for perfection not the achievement of it that defines a saint. Sainthood is no longer a station but is now a process. The hierarchy of holiness that has saints at the apex and the rest of humanity below it is now transformed into a level playing-field with saints being all those engaged on the path of striving for perfection.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Christian Lee Novetzke, *Religion and Public Memory: A Cultural History of Saint Namdev in India*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Berkeley: Dharma Publishing, 1979.

<sup>3</sup> Todd Lawson “Friendship, Illumination & the Water of Life”, paper presented to the annual meeting of the Muḥyiddin Ibn ‘Arabi Society (NA): “A Living Legacy: Ibn ‘Arabi in Today's World”, Columbia University, New York City, 23-24 October 2015.

<sup>4</sup> [www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/memorials-faithful](http://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/abdul-baha/memorials-faithful)—the online edition of the Persian, as at the time of completing this paper (5 November 2015), had not yet been transferred to the new website and reprints the original 1924 edition.