



COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY VIII. IN THE BAHAI FAITH

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viii. In the Bahai faith

Bahai cosmology can be considered to be based on three interrelated statements of *Bahā'-Allāh*. First, the human mind is strictly finite and limited in knowledge and understanding (1984, no. 26, p. 49; tr. p. 62). Second, no absolute knowledge of God or reality or the cosmos is therefore available to man (1984, no. 1, p. 11, no. 26, p. 48, no. 83, p. 110; tr. pp. 3-5, 62, 164-65). Third, from the above it follows that all conceptualizations and attempts by men to portray cosmology are “but a reflection of what has been created within themselves” (1984, no. 148, p. 204; tr. p. 316). Bahai cosmology can therefore be said to be based on a cognitive relativism, the view that all knowledge is relative to conceptual frameworks or cognitive structures.

The Bahai position with regard to the physical world can be summed up by stating that Bahais accept the findings of current science as being the best available interpretation of the physical world at any given time. To oppose current science on nonrational grounds is tantamount to ignorance and superstition (‘Abd-al-Bahā’, 1982, pp. 63-64, 107, 128, 161-62, 175-76, 231, 287,



316, 455).

The Bahai position with regard to metaphysics was developed further by ‘*Abd-al-Bahā*’ (1330, p. 48): Although mankind is capable of manifesting all the names and attributes of God, each individual’s constitution in fact manifests them in different degrees. This mixture then prefigures and determines the manner in which that individual views reality; that is, it provides individuals with the manner in which they interpret reality. *Shoghi Effendi* confirmed this position and provided the most comprehensive statement of it (p. 2): “[T]he fundamental principle enunciated by Bahādu’llāh . . . is that religious truth is not absolute but relative.”

The concept of cognitive relativism underlies all Bahai statements on cosmology and cosmogony. On the controversy within Islam between the two schools of *waḥdat al-wojūd* and *waḥdat al-šohūd* Bahā’-Allāh declared that both are stations or points of view (*maqām*) within the belief in divine unity (*tawḥīd*; n.d., pp. 105-16; cf. University of Leiden, ms. Or. 4971). On the origin of the world, Bahā’-Allāh stated that both the traditional views (one that the world has a point of origin and will have an end, the other that the world has neither a beginning nor an end) are correct and that the differences arise from variations in men’s hearts (*al-afeda*) and points of view (*al-anzār*; 1980, p. 82). Finally, on the controversy within Islam over the attributes of God, whether they are eternal and uncreated or are created in time, ‘*Abd-al-Bahā*’ provided the analysis referred to above (1330/1912, p. 48).

This relativism has resulted in an important difference between the Bahai faith and both Islam and Christianity. Whereas adherents of these two religions maintain that they have access to a source of absolute truth through Christ or the Qur’ān, Bahai writers maintain that all entities in the phenomenal world are contingent and not enduring. This difference has thus produced a further difference, in definition of the nature of time. In Islam and Christianity time is seen only in relation to particular hieratic irruptions into profane time, such as the advent of Christ or Moḥammad and the Day of Judgment. In the period between these two events time in effect stands still, for it does not matter whether one lives one hundred or one thousand years after Christ or Moḥammad; everything has the same relations backward to the revelatory event in the past and forward to the apocalyptic event in the future. In the Bahai view, however, human society evolves and develops. The religious teachings of the major prophets are therefore not absolute and for all time but are, rather, relevant to a particular time and have aspects that may



be subject to a decline in relevance over the course of centuries (1984, no. 38, p. 63; tr. p. 87-88).

Finally, it remains to consider the consequences of this metaphysical relativism in the Bahai faith. First, much religious debate and conflict in other religions has revolved around metaphysical questions. In the Bahai faith, however, as noted above, all metaphysical points of view, and therefore dogmatic positions, are considered ultimately to be purely relative to a particular individual or society for a particular time and therefore without universal validity. There must therefore be a change of emphasis in what is considered important in religion, and the doctrinal and soteriological importance of metaphysics is considerably less. Interest is no longer primarily in the structures of metaphysics but rather in relationships. That is, the focus of interest is no longer primarily on knowledge of what reality is but on the practical consequences of the individual's relationship with reality. It has shifted from structures to relationships, and ethics and social action are thus the prime considerations. This focus is what would be expected and is in fact found in the Bahai faith, where questions of metaphysics and dogmatic theology have been little considered. There is almost no literature on the subject, though there is much discussion and writing on social and ethical issues.

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Plate IX. Relief of the bull-slaying Mithras in the Mithraeum of the Circus Maximus, Rome. Photograph Musei Capitolini.