

# Abdu'l-Bahá on Christ and Christianity: Introduction

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see translation

During His second trip to France between January and March 1913, 'Abdu'l-Bahá met with Pasteur Monnier and a group of professors, clerics and theological students in Monnier's theological seminary in Paris. On the evening of February 17th 1913, 'Abdu'l-Bahá presented the Bahá'í teachings on Christ and Christianity to this group.

Pasteur Monnier was a distinguished Protestant theologian, vice-president of the Protestant Federation of France and professor of Protestant theology in Paris.

Fortunately a Persian transcript of the interview was made and within three years an English version appeared in print. The book in which it appears, Abdul Baha [sic] on Divine Philosophy, is a collection of unsourced letters and talks of 'Abdu'l-Bahá first published in Boston in 1916. It was last printed in New York around 1918 and consequently the contents of this interview have been inaccessible to most of the Bahá'í world. In response to a question about the authenticity of the interview, the Universal House of Justice have written, "The fact that an original record of the interview exists indicates that it is authentic. The translation, however, is an early one and may need to be revised. You would be advised, therefore, to consult the original text should any questions arise from the text" (from a letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to the editor, dated 16 April 1993). The Bahá'í Studies Review has reprinted this remarkable dialogue here with a set of new footnotes, containing revised translations made by Dr Khazeh Fananapazir from the original Persian which appears in the compilation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks in the West, *Khitábát*.

The interview consists of 'Abdu'l-Bahá answering five of Pasteur Monnier's questions. The first of these questions concerns the nature of Christ. In response 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes the statement that the Bahá'í belief in Christ is exactly what is recorded in the Gospels, with its meanings explained. Here then the framework is set, a common ground automatically established - two believers in the Gospels discussing its interpretation. It is striking how 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasises the importance of reason in this process - He says about John 1:1 (In the beginning was the Word . . .), "we give an explanation which is accepted by reason" and later in His commentary on John 10:30 (The Father is in me), He argues, "This we must understand through logical and scientific evidences". He had also developed this theme a few weeks earlier in a talk, "If religion were contrary to logical reason then it would cease to be a religion and be merely

superstition. . . . I say unto you: weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as religion. If it passes the test, then accept it, for it is truth! If however, it does not conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance!" (Paris Talks 143, 144).

In this brief introduction, two issues will be examined from the interview, the issues upon which the remainder of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations rest. 'Abdu'l-Bahá focuses on the Prologue of the Gospel of St. John in His discussion of the nature of Christ: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God". His interpretation leaves the audience in no doubt that Christ is glorified from a Bahá'í perspective, and this glory derives from His incarnation of all divine attributes and virtues (see also Some Answered Questions 206-7, Selections 60). 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the reality of Christ is the "depository of the infinite divine virtues". From a study of the original Greek of this verse, some modern biblical scholars have come to the same conclusion - John 1:1 is describing Christ as the expression or manifestation of God. The Greek of the last clause is kai theos en ho logos. The so-called Authorized Version has it as: "And the Word was God". This would suggest that 'Christ' and 'God' were interchangeable. However, as the late Bishop John Robinson explains in the classic *Honest to God*, the Greek more accurately implies that Christ is the "complete expression, the Word, of God":

But in Greek this would most naturally be represented by 'God' with the article, not theos but ho theos. But, equally, St. John is not saying that Jesus is a 'divine' man, in the sense with which the ancient world was familiar or in the sense in which the Liberals spoke of him. That would be theios. The Greek expression steers carefully between the two. It is impossible to represent it in a single English word, but the New English Bible, I believe, gets the sense pretty exactly with its rendering, 'And what God was, the Word was.' In other words, if one looked at Jesus, one saw God - for 'he who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14:9). He was the complete expression, the Word, of God. (*Honest to God* 71)

Another aspect of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation of John 1:1 is that He finds the concept of unity central to its meaning. In terms of the relationship between Christ and God, this involves the absolute unity of their qualities: "It is evident that these qualities were ever with God, . . . they are inseparable from him, because divinity is not subject to division". A number of Christian theologians have read the concept of unity into the second clause of John 1:1, "the Word was with God". Some biblical scholars have suggested that the Greek, *pros ton theon*, is more accurately translated, "the Word was towards God" because *pros* with the accusative case (*theon*) after the verb 'to be' means 'to go towards':

If the Word was in motion towards God, instead of being literally and plainly identical with God, then St. John is introducing the notion of development (or process, or progression) within the divine nature . . . "Movement towards" implies a separation that is in the process of being overcome. The movement of the Word towards God can then be seen as history: the history of the created universe, going back to its very beginning, is one of overcoming a separation from God, a process of reunification. (Witterschein, Preface xiv)

Pasteur Monnier's second question concerns the relationship between Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá answers by explaining that religions have two parts. The first of these is essential and spiritual, the "expression of the love of God", the moral side of religion. Elsewhere, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained that the essential teachings of religion "are faith in God, the acquirement of the virtues which characterize perfect manhood, praiseworthy moralities, the acquisition of the bestowals and bounties emanating from the divine effulgences - in brief, the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics" (Promulgation 403). The second aspect of religion is non-essential and "belongs to practical life", and "deals with exterior forms and ceremonies" (Paris Talks 142), "material conditions, the laws of human intercourse and social regulation. These are subject to change and transformation in accordance with the time, place and conditions" (Promulgation 97-8). The link that 'Abdu'l-Bahá forges between Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith is established by the fact that Bahá'u'lláh renewed, reiterated and reinvigorated the moral teachings of Christ "in the most complete form and deposited them in the hearts of men".

It is interesting that scholars in the field of comparative religion started discussing these ideas in the second half of this century. Much of this debate on the world's religions was sparked off by Toynbee's analysis of religion in the Gifford Lectures he delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1952 and 1953, and later published as *An Historian's Approach to Religion* in 1956. Toynbee began this analysis by arguing for a distinction - namely that, within in each religion, "there are essential counsels and truths, and there are nonessential practices and propositions" (Historian 262). The same essential experience, the "spiritual presence" was to be found in all religions. It is the transforming influence of this "presence" in these religions which leads to an "act of self-sacrifice" - the process of "giving up self-centredness" and focusing one's life on a new centre: the Absolute Reality and spiritual presence behind these religions (ibid. 273). Toynbee then was attempting to distil the common faith experience from the diversity of beliefs and practices.

The most important differences between the religions were in the

nonessentials. Toynbee listed examples of what he considered nonessentials: holy places, rituals, social conventions (such as celibacy for priests), and especially dogmas and schools of theology. In other words the entire complex of Creed (symbols, doctrines and theology), Code (ethical systems), and Cult (ritual, liturgy) by which religions try to express their faith was considered by Toynbee to be nonessential. However Toynbee added that the fact these externals, or what He termed "accretions", were nonessential did not mean that they are not necessary. They allow a religion to communicate its message and spiritual experience to people in particular societies at certain times in history (ibid. 264).

It is notable that 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the interview with Pasteur Monnier explains the destructive effects of the "dogmas and ritualism" of the religions and describes the laws of Judaism as "archaic" and "severe". The doctrine of the trinity is presented as a specific instance of the nonessential part of Christianity, and towards the end of the interview, He states that the Reality of Christ has been forgotten and been substituted by emphasis on the names of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Like 'Abdu'l-Bahá who focuses on the urgent necessity to renew the spiritual and essential in the religions, Toynbee's greater insistence was on the need to constantly redefine, reevaluate, discard, replace and adjust these nonessentials, for only then can a religion have an enduring relevance and appeal. Toynbee contended that most importantly the followers of religion must prevent themselves from equating the nonessential with the essential, and not "to allow the light radiated by the essence of a religion to be shut off from human souls by an opaque film of accretions" (Historian 269-70). If religion is not kept pure, "we are always relapsing from the worship of God into the worship of our tribe or of ourselves" (Christian Approach 159).

It is interesting that 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a talk in 1912 further develops this theme. He observes that religionists have turned away from the essential teachings and forsaken the spiritual principles that lie within their religion. He adds that this is the cause of the great discord, hatred and misunderstanding that was prevailing at the time. Indeed by returning to the spiritual core of religion, He proposes, the potential exists to aid in the settlement of some of the oldest and the newest conflicts in the world. In a section from this talk, which could just as well have been written today, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes the following bold challenge:

Consider what is happening in the Balkans. What conformity with the teachings of Christ do we witness in that deplorable picture? Has not man absolutely forgotten the divine command of Christ? In fact, such discord and warfare are evidences of disagreement upon the

non-essential precepts and laws of religious belief. Investigation of the one fundamental reality and allegiance to the essential unchanging principles of the Word of God can alone establish unity and love in human hearts. (Promulgation 445-6)

The reprinting with annotations of this interview is a rare opportunity to appreciate an inter-religious encounter 'Abdu'l-Bahá had with committed Christians. The text is unique for a number of reasons. The succinct and clear way it relates the Bahá'í Faith to Christianity and the natural method by which 'Abdu'l-Bahá constructs a link from this to world peace is astonishing. It is also the only time John of Chrysostom's metaphor appears in Bahá'í literature. But perhaps it is the seeds 'Abdu'l-Bahá sows for future dialogue that are the most interesting aspects of this encounter. In His affirmative and reverent use of the Bible, in His rational and moderate presentation of its interpretation, and in recounting the moment that He upheld to an audience of thousands of Jews the uniqueness of Christ, He acts as our true Exemplar. Undoubtedly Pasteur Monnier would have gone away with the same impressions as Marcus Bach did, another Christian professor of theology, after a conversation on the same subject with Shoghi Effendi: But the thing that struck me most as our meeting progressed was his unquestioned devotion to the Galilean. He was fully as faithful to Jesus as he was to Bahá'u'lláh. . . The knowledge, love, and commitment which Shoghi Effendi held for Jesus were a startling revelation. Through Him he had become the recipient of a religious stability and power that put me to shame. Jesus was surely, truly, undebatably, the Chosen of God. What would happen if we would really follow Him? The sword would be put away. The guns would be silenced. Men would be kind and humble in spirit, mighty in purpose. (Appreciation 29)

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[Go to transcript of  
'Abdu'l-Bahá's talk on Christ and Christianity]

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