

The Word of God: healing through all ages – a Bahá'í perspective

“... the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its people.”

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Dutch Summary

In de geschiedenis van de mens is religie een verschijnsel dat niet over het hoofd kan worden gezien. Het is een bron van inspiratie geweest voor velen, heeft bijgedragen aan de ontwikkeling van de individuele mens door het geven van perspectief op het leven, door normen en door waarden. Daardoor en daarmee heeft religie bijgedragen aan de ontwikkeling van beschavingen. In dit artikel wordt – vanuit een bahá'í-perspectief – ingegaan op het Woord van God. Om een goed beeld te krijgen van hetgeen dit bahá'í-perspectief, volgens de auteur, behelst, wordt eerst kort ingegaan op het Bahá'í Geloof. Daarna wordt de Wereld van God beschreven, een Wereld die het bevattingsvermogen van de mens verre te boven gaat. De mens kan echter kennis verkrijgen door het Woord van God. Dit Woord dat in den Beginne was (volgens bij Johannes, Mohammed, Zoroaster en Bahá'u'lláh) is eeuwig en wordt door Profeten of Manifestaties van God aan de mensheid gegeven. Het doel hiervan – ook wel aangeduid met het Verbond van God met de mens – is de mensheid op te voeden en leiding te geven. De invloed van het Woord van God op het hart en de ziel van de mens wordt besproken. Dit artikel wordt afgesloten met twee onderwerpen die de studie van vergelijkende godsdienstwetenschappen kunnen versterken. In de eerste plaats een thematische benadering van enkele godsdienstige onderwerpen waaraan de verschillende religies ieder hun eigen visie bijdragen en in de tweede plaats het gebruik van grote *textbased* databases die de Goddelijke Geschriften helpen ontsluiten.

1. Introduction

There are few people who question the impact of religion on men's development and progress. Some qualify this phenomenon as a power which animates the improvement of people's conduct and character, others have the opinion that religion is also responsible for blocking progress, science and development. In this essay we view from a Bahá'í perspective on the phenomenon of religion.

For an understanding of the Bahá'í perspective, first a short introduction on the Bahá'í Faith is given. Section 2 deals with the World of God while in section 3 attention is paid to eternal aspect of the Word of God. The transfer of the Word of God to men is the topic of section 4. Then the purpose of transferring the Word, e.g. the education of men, is described in section 5. The power of the Word of God is tremendous, it can change the world. Section 6 is focussed on the influence of the Word of God on the human heart and soul. Thereafter its impact on society and civilizations is discussed. This essay ends with some observations on research and education on the Word of God and with a section containing some conclusions.

The Bahá'í perspective on religion is as follows: *“The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men.”*² God has always guided mankind through its successive stages of development by sending Messengers or Prophets. Amongst Them are Adam, Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Krishna, Zoroaster³, Christ, Muhammad, Báb⁴ and Bahá'u'lláh. If people no longer follow the divine teachings, God renews the Covenant by sending a new Messenger. In this way God has lead mankind through its childhood, its youth and its adolescence. Now the phase of adulthood has started.

¹ The author wishes to thank Mrs. O. McKinley and Mr. Arjan Kersten for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.

² Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 215

³ Also known as Zarathustra

⁴ Báb, 1819 – 1850, Founder of the Bábi-religion, executed in Tabriz, Iran

The Bahá'í Faith is an independent world religion, originating from the 19th century when its Founder, Bahá'u'lláh, proclaimed that a new stage in the evolution of men had started. Bahá'u'lláh proclaims the oneness of God, the oneness of all religions and the oneness of humanity. The followers of the Bahá'í Faith, called Bahá'ís, aim to work and live together with all followers of all religions as stated by Bahá'u'lláh: *"Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."*⁵ The Faith is quite young, 160 years old, so for an assessment of its development and growth, one should reflect on for example Christianity round 160 AD or Islam in 160 AH. The Bahá'í Faith is established in 182 countries, has about 12,000 local communities and Bahá'ís reside in more than 130,000 municipalities.

In the Bahá'í writings the Intermediary between God and mankind is often referred to as the Manifestation of God. This term reflects the fact that the qualities of God are manifest in a human temple. In this formulation the Bahá'í Faith resembles the Buddhist's view that from time to time, in a human being all the divine attributes are being manifested in a perfect way. It also is in conformity with the other world religions. The aim of the Manifestations of God is *one and the same*: to guide men by providing teachings which consist of an eternal part and a part which is tailor-made for the people in the age and society to whom the Prophet comes.⁶ As Mohammad said: *"Every age has its own Book. Allah blots out and confirms what He pleases; and with Him is the Mother of the Book."*⁷

2. The World of God

A human being can not comprehend the World of God. It is as impossible for a creature to describe its Creator as for a painting to know anything about the painter. All the religions agree on the inability of men to properly describe the attributes and qualities of God. In the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh this is extensively addressed, for example:

*"To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. 'No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving.'"*⁸

As there can be no direct connection that enables man to get to know God, he needs an Intermediary, a Teacher. Bahá'u'lláh continues: *"The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace, according to His saying, 'His grace hath transcended all things; My grace hath encompassed them all,' hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence."*⁹ In this way, man can acquire knowledge of God, of His attributes, of the way to live life here on earth, knowledge about the essence of man, of his destination, and so on. We can however never claim to understand and grasp God. Another quotation which underlines this and God's Covenant with men is:

*"Our purpose in revealing these words is to show that the one true God hath, in His all-highest and transcendent station, ever been, and will everlastingly continue to be, exalted above the praise and conception of all else but Him. His creation hath ever existed, and the Manifestations of His Divine glory and the Day Springs of eternal holiness have been sent down from time immemorial, and been commissioned to summon mankind to the one true God. That the names of some of them are forgotten and the records of their lives lost is to be attributed to the disturbances and changes that have overtaken the world."*¹⁰

Time and place are issues of the physical world in which we live. In the spiritual world, i.e. in the world of God this is not the case. 'Abdu'l-Bahá addresses this issue in Some Answered Questions as follows: *"In the world of God there is no past, no future and no present; all are one. So when Christ said, 'In the beginning was the Word'¹¹-- that means it was, is and shall be; for in the world of God there is no time. Time has sway over creatures but*

⁵ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 95

⁶ See also The Hidden Words, e.g. the beginning of the Arabic Hidden Words

⁷ Sura 13:39.

⁸ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 46

⁹ Ibid, p. 46

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 172

¹¹ John 1:1.

not over God. For example, in the prayer He says, 'Hallowed be Thy name', the meaning is that Thy name was, is and shall be hallowed.¹² Morning, noon and evening are related to this earth, but in the sun there is neither morning, noon nor evening."¹³

The worlds of God are countless in number¹⁴ and all are a reflection of attributes of God. Creation or creatures are however not God. Bahá'u'lláh describes this as:

*"Every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading into His knowledge, a sign of His sovereignty, a revelation of His names, a symbol of His majesty, a token of His power, a means of admittance into His straight Path...."*¹⁵ So, and that is no surprise, we can see qualities of God reflected in men.

The inability of men to describe, worship or praise God in a proper way, is a source of lamentation to many mystics and believers of religions. An example is:

*"How can, then, such a man succeed in befittingly extolling the One through a motion of Whose finger all the names and their kingdom were called into being, and all the attributes and their dominion were created, and Who, through yet another motion of that same finger, hath united the letters B and E (Be) and knit them together, manifesting thereby what the highest thoughts of Thy chosen ones who enjoy near access to Thee are unable to grasp, and what the profoundest wisdom of those of Thy loved ones that are wholly devoted to Thee are powerless to fathom."*¹⁶

3. The Word of God: eternal

In the opening of the work of John in the Bible, it says: *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not."*¹⁷

We find accordingly passages in other religions like in Yasna 19, Zarathustra asked of Ahura Mazda: *"O Ahura Mazda, Thou most bounteous Spirit! maker of the corporeal worlds, the holy One! which was that word which Thou did'st declare to me, which was before the sky, and before the water, before the earth, and before the cattle, before the plants, and before the fire, and before the holy man, and the Demon-gods (the Daevas), before the Khrafstra-men, and before all the incarnate world; even before all the good creatures made by Mazda, and which contain (and are) the seed of righteousness? Thereupon Ahura Mazda said: It was this piece, the Ahunavairya, O Spitama Zarathustra! which I pronounced as thine before the sky, and before the waters, before the land, and before the cattle and the plants, and before the fire, Ahura Mazda's son, before the holy man, and before the Daevas, and Khrafstra-men, and before the entire corporeal world, even before the good creatures made by Mazda, which contain (and are) the seed of righteousness."*¹⁸

This Word of God is a source of inspiration and fascination for many believers. Bahá'u'lláh explains that this Word was not only at the beginning of creation but also dominates the whole of creation:

*"The Word of God is the king of words and its pervasive influence is incalculable. It hath ever dominated and will continue to dominate the realm of being. The Great Being saith: The Word is the master key for the whole world, inasmuch as through its potency the doors of the hearts of men, which in reality are the doors of heaven, are unlocked. It is an ocean inexhaustible in riches, comprehending all things. Every thing which can be perceived is but an emanation therefrom."*¹⁹

Man has – and must have – difficulty in understanding and grasping this Word of God. It does not come from the world of creation: *"... know that the Word of God (exalted and glorified is He!), is far superior to what is comprehended by the senses; because it does not belong to the nature nor essence, rather it is sanctified from the known elements and free from comprehended and high rudiments. It became manifest without an utterance made, or a voice breathed. It is the command of God.... Verily the Word of God has never ceased to descend upon the world. It is the overflowing, the greatest bounty, which was the cause of abundance. It is the being*

¹² Matt. 6:9; Luke 11:2

¹³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 154

¹⁴ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 151

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 160

¹⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 303

¹⁷ The Holy Bible, King James version, 1984, Tyndale House Publishers Inc., Wheaton, Illinois, John 1, 1-5.

¹⁸ Yasna 19: Zand or commentary on the ahunwar

¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 173

which is sanctified from what was and is."²⁰

The Word of God is immensely exalted above that which man can see and understand as illustrated by the following quotation of Bahá'ú'lláh: "... *the world and what is witnessed therein will never be equal to one word of the Words of God; because it is forever and ever transitory and evanescent; but the Word of God is eternal and everlasting, as the eternality of the names and qualities.*"²¹

The power of the Word of God is tremendous. Every letter, every word is endowed by it. In the Bahá'í writings it is said that the whole creation is recreated by the utterance of a word by God. A quotation which refers to this issue is: "*Know thou of a certainty that the Revelation of every other Name is accompanied by a similar manifestation of Divine power. Every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a mother letter, and every word uttered by Him Who is the Well Spring of Divine Revelation is a mother word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth.*"²² And further "*Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. All the wondrous works ye behold in this world have been manifested through the operation of His supreme and most exalted Will, His wondrous and inflexible Purpose.*"²³

Indeed, it is very hard to grasp and understand the complexity and nature of this Word of God, its operation, its essence and its relation to creation itself. There is not just one word but we see in the Writings of the Prophets references to other words. Even the power of the Letter is described by the Manifestations of God. We conclude this paragraph with a quotation of Bahá'u'lláh tells about the influence of the First Word on creation and thus actually recreates the world.

"I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded, than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths. Through that Word the realities of all created things were shaken, were divided, separated, scattered, combined and reunited, disclosing, in both the contingent world and the heavenly kingdom, entities of a new creation, and revealing, in the unseen realms, the signs and tokens of Thy unity and oneness."²⁴

4. The Word of God given through His Manifestations

In all religions we find both the Word of God and the Pen of God. "Qalam Allah" refers to the infallible word and its exact translation "Exalted Pen" points directly to the transfer of the Word of God to mankind²⁵. The term "Exalted Pen" is also often used in the Bahá'í Faith, see e.g. the Súrat ul-Qalam (The Chapter of the Pen), revealed by Bahá'u'lláh.²⁶ This Súrat is, according to Milani and Fananapazir, an important document as it introduces Bahá'í theology and the claims of Bahá'u'lláh. Besides that, it establishes a dialogue between the Bahá'í revelation and the theosophical and mystical tradition within Islam. Sometimes the pen refers to the material instrument but more often the Pen refers to the Manifestation of God. In the Qur'án, Sura 96 states: "*For thy Lord is the most Beneficent, Who Hath taught by the Pen, Hath taught man what he knoweth not.*"²⁷ The Qur'án mentions the pen on yet another occasion, namely in the Quranic Súrat ul-Qalam (the Chapter of the Pen), also known as the Súrat un-Nún (the Chapter of the letter N): "*Nún. By the Pen and that which they inscribe.*"²⁸ According to one of the Islamic traditions the pen was the first thing God created, see Jámi'ul-Bayán at Tabari,²⁹ and notice the resemblance with John 1:1.

The Will of God is given to men through the Manifestation of God. The Manifestation is the Intermediary between God and mankind. In the Manifestation the attributes of God are manifest. Bahá'u'lláh describes this as: "*The essence of belief in Divine unity consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same. By this is meant that*

²⁰ Compilations, Bahá'í Scriptures, p. 191

²¹ Ibid, p. 234

²² Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 141

²³ Ibid, p. 141

²⁴ Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh, p. 295

²⁵ See also Sura 96, 4.

²⁶ An interesting study is: A Study of The Pen Motif in the Bahá'í Writings, 1999, by K. Milani and N. Fananapazir.

²⁷ Qur'án 96:1-5.

²⁸ Qur'án 68:1 and Milani & Fananapazir

²⁹ Quoted from at-Tabari through a chain of transmitters leading to Ibn-'Abbás: "*The first thing created by God was the Pen. Then He made it to stream forth to that which would exist. Then He made steam to ascend from the waters, by which He created the heavens. Then He created 'nún, and expanded the earth on the back of the 'nún'. Then He moved the earth and caused it to grow.*" (Jámi'ul-Bayán 29:14)

whatever pertaineth to the former, all His acts and doings, whatever He ordaineth or forbiddeth, should be considered, in all their aspects, and under all circumstances, and without any reservation, as identical with the Will of God Himself."³⁰ A more elaborated (and mystic) essay on this is "Gems of Divine Mysteries" revealed by Bahá'u'lláh during his exile in Baghdad.³¹

The Manifestations have three aspects/planes. First, there is the physical reality, which depends upon the physical body and its abilities and limitations. Second, the individual reality, that is to say, the rational soul. Third, the divine appearance, which is the divine perfections, the cause of the life of existence, of the education of souls, of the guidance of people, and of the enlightenment of the contingent world. For a more extensive explanation see below³².

Bahá'u'lláh explains the purpose of this continuous divine revelation - also known as the concept of progressive revelation - as follows: "*The purpose of the one true God in manifesting Himself is to summon all mankind to truthfulness and sincerity, to piety and trustworthiness, to resignation and submissiveness to the Will of God, to forbearance and kindness, to uprightness and wisdom. His object is to array every man with the mantle of a saintly character, and to adorn him with the ornament of holy and goodly deeds.*"³³ This is the purpose underlying all Revelations and Manifestations God has sent to mankind: to safeguard and uplift men. See also: "*.....the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples.*"³⁴

Among the evidences for being a Manifestation of God is the Message itself. The Word of God is - in itself - a proof of the truth of a Manifestation of God. In the Qur'an the question was raised: "*What thing is most weighty in evidence?*". The answer says: "*Allah is Witness between me and you: this Qur'an hath been revealed to me by inspiration that I may warn you and all whom it reaches. Can ye possibly bear witness that besides Allah there is another God?*"³⁵ Similar quotations can be taken from other Holy Books but in this essay we will not elaborate on this further.

A clear metaphor for the purpose and operation of the Manifestation of God is given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. We present it here:

"Consider the world of existence -- that is to say, the world of material things. The solar system is dark and obscure, and in it the sun is the center of light, and all the planets of the system revolve around its might and are partakers of its bounty. The sun is the cause of life and illumination, and the means of the growth and development of all the beings of the solar system; for without the bounty of the sun no living being could exist: all would be dark and destroyed. Therefore, it is evident and clear that the sun is the center of light and the cause of the life of the beings of the solar system.

*In like manner, the Holy Manifestations of God are the centers of the light of reality, of the source of mysteries, and of the bounties of love. They are resplendent in the world of hearts and thoughts, and shower eternal graces upon the world of spirits, They give spiritual life and are shining with the light of realities and meanings. The enlightenment of the world of thought comes from these centers of light and sources of mysteries. Without the bounty of the splendor and the instructions of these Holy Beings the world of souls and thoughts would be opaque darkness. Without the irrefutable teachings of those sources of mysteries the human world would become the pasture of animal appetites and qualities, the existence of everything would be unreal, and there would be no true life. That is why it is said in the Gospel: 'In the beginning was the Word', meaning that it became the cause of all life.*³⁶

Now consider the influence of the sun upon the earthly beings, what signs and results become evident and clear from its nearness and remoteness, from its rising or its setting. At one time it is autumn, at another time spring; or again it is summer or winter. When the sun passes the line of the equator, the life-giving spring will become manifest in splendor, and when it is in the summer solstice, the fruits will attain to the acme of perfection, grains and plants will yield their produce, and earthly beings will attain their most complete development and growth.

³⁰ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 166

³¹ e.g. 44-51

³² Compilations, Bahá'í Scriptures, p. 234

³³ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 299

³⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 19

³⁵ Sura 6

³⁶ John 1:1

*In like manner, when the Holy Manifestation of God, Who is the sun of the world of His creation, shines upon the worlds of spirits, of thoughts and of hearts, then the spiritual spring and new life appear, the power of the wonderful springtime becomes visible, and marvellous benefits are apparent. As you have observed, at the time of the appearance of each Manifestation of God extraordinary progress has occurred in the world of minds, thoughts and spirits. For example, in this divine age see what development has been attained in the world of minds and thoughts, and it is now only the beginning of its dawn. Before long you will see that new bounties and divine teachings will illuminate this dark world and will transform these sad regions into the paradise of Eden.*³⁷

It is one of the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith that this Covenant of God will continue to exist: in future God will – again – provide mankind with new teachings: the eternal ones are repeated and underlined whereas new ones – specially for the needs and capabilities of that time – are offered. In explaining this process of renewal of revelation, every Manifestation speaks about the Last of Days, of resurrection, of renewal, of a new Buddha, and so on. The Kitáb-i-Iqán (in English: The Book of Certitude), Bahá'u'lláh describes the situation in which the believers and mankind in general no longer abide by the Word of God anymore and a new Messenger of God gives – again – the Word of God:

*“On their tongue the mention of God hath become an empty name; in their midst His holy Word a dead letter. Such is the sway of their desires, that the lamp of conscience and reason hath been quenched in their hearts, and this although the fingers of divine power have unlocked the portals of the knowledge of God, and the light of divine knowledge and heavenly grace hath illumined and inspired the essence of all created things, in such wise that in each and every thing a door of knowledge hath been opened, and within every atom traces of the sun hath been made manifest. And yet, in spite of all these manifold revelations of divine knowledge, which have encompassed the world, they still vainly imagine the door of knowledge to be closed, and the showers of mercy to be stilled. Clinging unto idle fancy, they have strayed far from the Urvatu'l-Vuthqa of divine knowledge. Their hearts seem not to be inclined to knowledge and the door thereof, neither think they of its manifestations, inasmuch as in idle fancy they have found the door that leadeth unto earthly riches, whereas in the manifestation of the Revealer of knowledge they find naught but the call to self-sacrifice. They therefore naturally hold fast unto the former, and flee from the latter. Though they recognize in their hearts the Law of God to be one and the same, yet from every direction they issue a new command, and in every season proclaim a fresh decree.”*³⁸

5. The Word of God: purpose of the transfer to man

The offering of the Word of God to man has a clear purpose: *“By the raising of the voice and by the exalted Word, it has been our aim that the ears of the people of the world should be purified through the kawther of divine utterance from false narrations and be prepared to hearken unto the blessed, pure exalted Word which hath appeared from the treasury of the knowledge of the maker of heaven and creator of names.”*³⁹ In all religions man is considered to have talents and capabilities which need to be developed. This development is not a process man can do for and by himself, a teacher is needed to help man to explore and expand these qualities. The Bahá'í faith is very clear in this: a human being is like a mine full of precious gems: he needs to be educated. This is the purpose of God. The following quotation illustrates this and links this development process directly to the concept of progressive revelation in the previous paragraph.

*“The Purpose of the one true God in revealing Himself unto men is to lay bare those gems that lie hidden within the mine of their true and inmost selves. That the divers communions of the earth, and the manifold systems of religious belief, should never be allowed to foster the feelings of animosity among men, is, in this Day, of the essence of the Faith of God and His Religion. These principles and laws, these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.”*⁴⁰

The reason for the mission of the Prophets is to educate men. Character building and an ongoing process of civilization building is the result of the impulse a new Manifestation of God gives to mankind. Its impact is shown throughout history and turns a coal into a diamond, an insect into an eagle, a drop into an ocean: *“.. so that this piece of coal may become a diamond, and this fruitless tree may be engrafted and yield the sweetest, most delicious fruits. When man reaches the noblest state in the world of humanity, then he can make further*

³⁷ Some Answered Questions, p. 162

³⁸ The Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 29

³⁹ Compilations, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 191

⁴⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 287

*progress in the conditions of perfection*⁴¹

Religion is not meant to be a cause of disunity and disorder. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is very explicit in this: *“If the Holy Books were rightly understood none of this discord and distress would have existed, but love and fellowship would have prevailed instead. This is true with all the other religions as well. The essential purpose of the religion of God is to establish unity among mankind. The divine Manifestations were founders of the means of fellowship and love. They did not come to create discord, strife and hatred in the world. The religion of God is the cause of love, but if it is made to be the source of enmity and bloodshed, surely its absence is preferable to its existence; for then it becomes satanic, detrimental and an obstacle to the human world.”*⁴²

The remedy provided by the Manifestations of God forms a sound basis for man and for society. Besides that it is a source of inspiration for all. The peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the divine ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and demands of the age in which they were revealed. See also.⁴³ The Word of God given by the Manifestation of God for that age is *“...the straight Path, the fixed and immovable foundation. Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure.”*⁴⁴

The recognition of the Manifestation and the obedience to His teachings are the starting point of education and further improvement of man. One might say that this constitutes the medicine for the cure of the diseases of the society and of mankind at that time. That the principles and teachings of a Manifestation of God cannot be separated from His recognition is obvious in the many Holy Books. In the Bahá’í writings for example it says: *“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 .. It behoveth every one ... to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.”*⁴⁵

Bahá’ú’lláh elaborates on this metaphor: *“The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require.”*⁴⁶ But also in the revelation of Zarathustra we find this warning against taking out the things we like and leaving the rest. The totality of the teachings of the Manifestation is the cure for the diseases of mankind in that age.

*“And whoever, O Spitama Zarathustra! while undertoning the part(s) of the Ahuna-vairya (or this piece the Ahuna-vairya), takes ought therefrom, whether the half, or the third, or the fourth, or the fifth, I who am Ahura Mazda will draw his soul off from the better world; yea, so far off will I withdraw it as the earth is large and wide; [and this earth is as long as it is broad].”*⁴⁷

6. The Word of God: influence on the heart and soul

Bahá’ú’lláh states in the Súrat ul-Qalam⁴⁸ that the Pen gives life to all creatures through a word from His Mouth. The Word of God is addressed to the heart and soul of man. Let us first give some attention to the Bahá’í perspective on the nature of the soul and the heart of man.

Bahá’ú’lláh states, on the human soul: *“Verily I say, the human soul is exalted above all egress and regress. It is still, and yet it soareth; it moveth, and yet it is still. It is, in itself, a testimony that beareth witness to the existence of a world that is contingent, as well as to the reality of a world that hath neither beginning nor end.”*⁴⁹ And elsewhere: *“... the human soul is, in its essence, one of the signs of God, a mystery among His mysteries. It is one of the mighty signs of the Almighty, the harbinger that proclaimeth the reality of all the worlds of God. Within it lieth concealed that which the world is now utterly incapable of apprehending.”*⁵⁰

⁴¹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 236

⁴² Compilations, Bahá’í Scriptures, p. 334

⁴³ Bahá’ú’lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’ú’lláh, p. 215

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Bahá’ú’lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 19

⁴⁶ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’ú’lláh, p. 210

⁴⁷ Yasna 19: Zand or commentary on the Ahunwar

⁴⁸ Súrat ul-Qalam: 126

⁴⁹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’ú’lláh, p. 161

⁵⁰ Ibid, p. 160

This individual soul of a person is only temporarily on this earth, it will continue to progress when this mortal body breaks down. Bahá'ís do not believe in reincarnation, the soul does not return into this world but progresses in the spiritual world. Bahá'u'lláh says on this matter: *“Know thou of a truth that the soul, after its separation from the body, will continue to progress until it attaineth the presence of God, in a state and condition which neither the revolution of ages and centuries, nor the changes and chances of this world, can alter. It will endure as long as the Kingdom of God, His sovereignty, His dominion and power will endure. It will manifest the signs of God and His attributes, and will reveal His loving kindness and bounty.*

...

*The nature of the soul after death can never be described, nor is it meet and permissible to reveal its whole character to the eyes of men. The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth. The purpose underlying Their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High.*⁵¹

...

In the Bahá'í Writings the soul is described as *“a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel. It is the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him. If it be faithful to God, it will reflect His light, and will, eventually, return unto Him. If it fail, however, in its allegiance to its Creator, it will become a victim to self and passion, and will, in the end, sink in their depths.”*⁵²

The soul of man needs guidance and teachings.⁵³ The commandments of the Manifestations of God provide these, in all phases of human development. *“O ye peoples of the world! Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures. Thus hath it been sent down from the heaven of the Will of your Lord, the Lord of Revelation. Were any man to taste the sweetness of the words which the lips of the All-Merciful have willed to utter, he would, though the treasures of the earth be in his possession, renounce them one and all, that he might vindicate the truth of even one of His commandments, shining above the Dayspring of His bountiful care and loving-kindness.”*⁵⁴ And elsewhere: *“Man is said to be the greatest representative of God, and he is the Book of Creation because all the mysteries of beings exist in him. If he comes under the shadow of the True Educator and is rightly trained, he becomes the essence of essences, the light of lights, the spirit of spirits; he becomes the center of the divine appearances, the source of spiritual qualities, the rising-place of heavenly lights, and the receptacle of divine inspirations. If he is deprived of this education, he becomes the manifestation of satanic qualities, the sum of animal vices, and the source of all dark conditions.”*⁵⁵

The impact of the Word of God on believers and society is tremendous as we have seen in the past: human character and conduct being changed, civilizations built and sciences boosted. Recall the first universities in the Islamic world and the influence of Christianity on the Roman Empire. See for example Galen.⁵⁶ This power of the Word of God, when pure and renewed, can revive mankind and help in the solution of modern problems whether sociological, economic or spiritual.

“The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?” In the middle of the 19th century Bahá'u'lláh addressed these words to a physician in explaining that nothing but the Word of God can cure the diseases of present-day society. He continues: *“Is it within human power, O Hakim, to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and*

⁵¹ Ibid, p.156

⁵² Ibid, p. 159

⁵³ *“The All-loving God created man to radiate the Divine light and to illumine the world by his words, action and life. If he is without virtue he becomes no better than a mere animal, and an animal devoid of intelligence is a vile thing.”*, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris Talks, p. 112

⁵⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, p. 19

⁵⁵ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 236

⁵⁶ Galen, the physician, in his book in which he comments on the treatise of Plato on the art of government, says that the fundamental principles of religion have a great influence upon a perfect civilization because "the multitude cannot understand the connection of explanatory words; so it has need of symbolical words announcing the rewards and punishments of the other world; and that which proves the truth of this affirmation," he says, "is that today we see a people called Christians who believe in rewards and punishments; and this sect show forth beautiful actions like those which a true philosopher performs. So we all see clearly that they do not fear death, that they expect and desire nothing from the multitude but justice and equity, and they are considered as true philosophers."

*indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish. The Force capable of such a transformation transcendeth the potency of the Elixir itself. The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change.”*⁵⁷ The Word of God has – thus – been made the carrier of the divine Elixir.

The Word of God changes the heart and soul of the individual. It is directed to the heart of man. Just like Christ said, Bahá’u’lláh writes to the kings and rulers of the earth: *“It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men. Upon them the eyes of Bahá are fastened. Whoso followeth his Lord, will renounce the world and all that is therein.”*⁵⁸ The message of the Manifestation is focussed on the uplifting of man and guiding him to his true destination. See for example: *“All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. ... To act like the beasts of the field is unworthy of man. Those virtues that befit his dignity are forbearance, mercy, compassion and loving-kindness towards all the peoples and kindreds of the earth.”*⁵⁹

The renewal of the hearts of men by the Manifestation is described by many writers. Some speak about changing in character, some about a new spirit with which the body is endowed. To illustrate the impact on the heart and soul of the Spirit of Revelation here, a short description given by Bahá’u’lláh is presented:

*“At that hour will the mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn, and, through the trumpet-blast of knowledge, will awaken the heart, the soul, and the spirit from the slumber of negligence. Then will the manifold favours and outpouring grace of the holy and everlasting Spirit confer such new life upon the seeker that he will find himself endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind. He will contemplate the manifest signs of the universe, and will penetrate the hidden mysteries of the soul. Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leadeth him to the stations of absolute certitude. He will discover in all things the mysteries of divine Revelation and the evidences of an everlasting manifestation.”*⁶⁰

According to Islam, the Word of God is eternal⁶¹ and actually that is what all monotheistic religions proclaim. The Word of God is the source of all learning and surpasses men’s creative knowledge and reasoning.

Bahá’u’lláh is quite explicit in this:

*“For compared with all other proofs and tokens, the divinely-revealed verses shine as the sun, whilst all others are as stars. To the peoples of the world they are the abiding testimony, the incontrovertible proof, the shining light of the ideal King. Their excellence is unrivalled, their virtue nothing can surpass. They are the treasury of the divine pearls and the depository of the divine mysteries. They constitute the indissoluble Bond, the firm Cord, the Urvatu'l-Vuthqa, the inextinguishable Light. Through them floweth the river of divine knowledge, and gloweth the fire of His ancient and consummate wisdom. This is the fire which, in one and the same moment, kindleth the flame of love in the breasts of the faithful, and induceth the chill of heedlessness in the heart of the enemy.”*⁶²

Being the spiritual food for the soul, it will be evident that all world religions prescribe unto men daily prayers. The believer can thus easily incorporate the Word of God in his daily life. A short term orientation or a strong wish to see quick results – certainly in the society in which we live at the moment – might lead to disappointments. God’s plan has a long working range. Bahá’u’lláh describes how the Word of God will enkindle the soul of the individual who prays and will attract other people to him. Not only has the prayer an influence on the believer himself, it will also affect the environment around him and be a cause for righteousness. But, Bahá’u’lláh continues, this takes time to yield results and sooner or later this will have an influence on his soul. In this way the wisdom of obligatory prayers and reciting the Words of God at dawn and nightfall is explained. A Bahá’í prayer book has this quotation as a start:

“Intone, O My servant, the verses of God that have been received by thee, as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him, that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul, and attract the hearts of all men. Whoso reciteth, in the privacy of his chamber, the verses revealed by God, the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb. Though he may, at first, remain unaware of its effect, yet the virtue of the grace

⁵⁷ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 200

⁵⁸ Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 210

⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 214

⁶⁰ Bahá’u’lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 196

⁶¹ Sura 85, 22.

⁶² Bahá’u’lláh, The Kitáb-i-Iqán, p. 203

*vouchsafed unto him must needs sooner or later exercise its influence upon his soul. Thus have the mysteries of the Revelation of God been decreed by virtue of the Will of Him Who is the Source of power and wisdom.”*⁶³

It is clear that the reality of mankind is diverse, that opinions are various and sentiments different. This difference of opinions, of thoughts, of intelligence, of sentiments among the human species arises from essential necessity because everyone is different. Therefore, we need of a general power which may dominate the sentiments, the opinions and the thoughts of all, thanks to which these divisions may no longer have effect. All individuals may be brought under the influence of the unity of the world of humanity. It is clear and evident that the greatest power in the human world is the love of God. It brings the different peoples under the shadow of the tent of affection; it gives to the antagonistic and hostile nations and families the greatest love and union.

7. Research and education on the Word of God

The Word of God is of all ages. Its purpose is to educate man and thus elevate him from the world of the animal to the spiritual world. Bahá'u'lláh states that in all the Books of the Manifestations lie hidden gems of knowledge and wisdom. Research and study in comparative religion is therefore a very worthwhile and fascinating activity. Many researchers and students feel inspired and are amazed by the wisdom and beauty in the Holy Books.

The comparative study of religions could be strengthened in two ways. One is the theme-wise comparative study, the other the use of modern text based databases, like for example the Ocean-database.

There are major themes that are addressed in all Holy Books: consolation, tribulations, purpose of life, prayer, fasting, love, tolerance, forgiveness, soul, life after mortal death, and so on. These are themes which are strongly connected with the life of the individual or the society as a whole. At the moment, the comparative study of religions is largely pillar based, meaning that religions are studied *an sich*. It could be an interesting experiment to choose a theme and dedicate a course to it in which contributions from the various religions are presented.

Since Adam, symbolically the first Messenger of God, human capacity has increased but also its speech and script. Until Muhammad, the Word of God was – in general – given by way of storytelling but from that time on, divine teachings were giving in writing.⁶⁴ With computers and databases almost all religious written sources can be accessed: in a split second one can find what Moses said on the subject of law and punishment, what Buddha said on forbearance, and so on. For students and researchers the immense ocean of His Words is accessible through these facilities. One example is the Ocean programme but many others exist. This is an opportunity which will boost the comparative study of religions.

8. Conclusions

In even the earliest recollections of human history, the phenomenon of the Word of God is described. The Word of God is a source of inspiration, it has tremendous impact on character building, on piety, on mercy and gives a perspective on life itself. In all religions the power of the Word of God is acknowledged. Civilizations and sciences are animated by the Word of God. Its power to revive human beings and its effect on the heart of man, is of all ages.

The Word of God has a tremendous impact on both the individual as on the society in which he lives. This Word of God is not given in the same proportion and content to mankind. In each revelation we can distinguish eternal teachings which are of all ages and focussed on the education of men. They include the laws on praying, fasting, and so on. Other laws and ordinances are specially given for the age and society in which the Manifestation of God appears. They concern legal, social and economic issues by which mankind can solve the problems of that age.

The power of the Word of God can in no wise be overestimated. This power can recreate a human soul, can be a strong stimulus for “living-the-life” according to the teachings of the Manifestation, can sharpen men’s abilities and yield a more harmonious society.

When the Word of God is forgotten, man will forget his exalted destination and station. His purpose is not to live like an animal in the field. This world needs the Word of God.

⁶³ Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 295

⁶⁴ The Qur'án, the Bayán and the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

*“Thus when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellisheth the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference is like the .. the variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. When these different limbs and organs come under the influence of man's sovereign soul, and the soul's power pervadeth the limbs and members, veins and arteries of the body, then difference reinforceth harmony, diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for co-ordination.”*⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 291