



STATEMENT DB-035

BAHA'I-CHRISTIAN DIALOGUE: Some Key Issues Considered

by Francis J. Beckwith

One religious group to originate in the past two centuries that has not received enough attention from evangelical Christians is the Baha'i World Faith.¹ Baha'is believe that all of the world's major religions are progressive revelations from God, each designed for its particular historical era. The Baha'i religion teaches that Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Bab (the Persian founder of a nineteenth-century religious movement which laid the foundation for Baha'ism) were all prophets or manifestations of God for their time.² However, Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i religion, the successor of the Bab, and the most recent manifestation, is the one who should now be revered and obeyed.

Baha'u'llah's greatest teaching was the oneness and unity of mankind. According to Baha'u'llah, every race, both sexes, and the great religious truths all come from one God. While Christians may appreciate some of the humanitarian and peace doctrines of the Baha'is, they take issue with the Baha'i claim to compatibility with their faith; for Baha'ism denies several essential Christian doctrines.

Since the publication of my Christian response to the Baha'i World Faith, *Baha'i* (Bethany House, 1985), I have had several encounters with both Baha'is and non-Baha'is who have questioned my position on a number of key issues regarding the relationship between Baha'ism and Christianity. For example, in a detailed critique of my book, Steve McConnell, a non-Baha'i from Bellevue, Washington, asked me, "Could Christianity's conception of God withstand the cursory logical tests to which you subject the Baha'i's God?"³ McConnell contends that it is unfair for me to argue that because the Baha'i manifestations of God give us contradictory concepts of God (monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, etc.), the Baha'i view of God must be false. After all, he insists, the Christian conception of God has its own logical problems.

In February 1988 on a Boston radio program I had the opportunity to dialogue with Robert Stockman, a Baha'i leader and doctoral candidate at Harvard Divinity School. Stockman argued that just as the Jewish leaders were mistaken about Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, so also the Christian church has failed to see how Baha'u'llah fulfilled a number of biblical prophecies. In his view, Jesus was rejected because the Jews interpreted the Old Testament prophecies literally, and in the same manner, Christians do not see Baha'u'llah as the Second Coming of Jesus because they interpret the New Testament prophecies literally.

Another interesting response came from a Baha'i in southern Nevada, Bill Garbett, who told me that Baha'ism has suffered no divisions as has Christianity in its many schisms. He concluded from this that the Baha'i World Faith must be God's religion.

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In this article I will respond to these arguments as they relate to the different views held by Baha'is and Christians on (1) the nature of God, (2) biblical prophecy, and (3) religious unity.

BAHA'IS AND THE NATURE OF GOD

Although Baha'is teach that God is unknowable in his essence, they believe that God does reveal something of himself to man, especially through his "manifestations" (i.e., Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Baha'u'llah, et. al.).⁴ For those familiar with the conflicting doctrines of the major world religions associated with these "manifestations," however, it is rather apparent that they cannot all be true (see Table). Yet this is exactly what the Baha'is maintain, namely, that each of these religious leaders was a manifestation of God for his own era and therefore spoke some truth about God's nature.

The Doctrine of God Taught by the Alleged Manifestations ⁵	
MANIFESTATION	IMPORTANT ELEMENTS IN HIS DOCTRINE OF GOD
Moses	One personal God. The universe is not eternal, but was created by God (Gen. 1-3; Deut. 6:4; etc.).
Krishna	Mix of polytheism and impersonal pantheism. The universe is eternal.
Zoroaster	One good god and one evil god (religious dualism).
Buddha	God not relevant; essentially agnostic.
Confucius	Polytheistic.
Muhammad	One personal God who cannot have a Son.
Jesus Christ	One personal God who does have a Son (Mark 12:29; John 4:24; 5:18-19; etc.)
Baha'u'llah	God and the universe, which is an emanation of God, are co-eternal. ⁶

The fact that the various alleged manifestations of God represented God in contradictory ways implies either that manifestations of God can contradict one another or that God's own nature is contradictory. If the manifestations are allowed to contradict one another, then there is no way to separate false manifestations from true ones or to discover if any of them really speaks for the true and living God. Yet the Baha'is obviously do not accept every person who claims to be a manifestation of God (e.g., Jim Jones, founder of Jonestown). If, on the other hand, God's own nature is said to be contradictory, that is, that God is both one God and many gods, that God is both able and not able to have a Son, both personal and impersonal, etc., then the Baha'i concept of God is reduced to meaninglessness.

Can Christian Doctrines Withstand Scrutiny?

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As I noted earlier, Steven McConnell has asked whether the Christian concept of God could measure up to this sort of scrutiny. He asserts, "Subjected to the glossy examination you give the Baha'i God, the paradox of Jesus being fully human *and* fully divine as well as the paradox of the unity and individuality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would be mere contradictions!" He then asks, "So why are Christianity's paradoxes (contradictions) more virtuous than Baha'i's?"⁷

Several comments are in order. First, Christian thinkers take an entirely different attitude toward their problematic doctrines than the Baha'is. For example, many Christian philosophers and theologians have spent much time trying to explain these doctrines in a way that is coherent and philosophically sound.⁸ Christians believe that these problematic doctrines are logically reconcilable because they are in fact ultimately noncontradictory. On the other hand, the Baha'is do not seem particularly concerned about whether their doctrine of God is internally consistent.

Second, the paradoxes inherent in the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity are not comparable to the contradictions inherent in the Baha'i concept of God. When the Bible asserts both the humanity and the deity of Jesus it is *not* asserting something that is self-contradictory by definition. Christians do not believe that Jesus was both God and not-God, but rather that Jesus was both God and man. In other words, when Christians assert that God became man they are not asserting that God became *merely* man (although He was *fully* man), but rather that the Son of God took on a human nature *in addition to* His divine nature. Although we may not fully comprehend how the divine and human natures interacted in the person of Jesus, this is not the same thing as saying that the concept of a God-man is self-contradictory.

Likewise, the doctrine of the Trinity, although paradoxical, is not self-contradictory. The doctrine of the Trinity asserts that three divine persons share the same substance or essence (i.e., the three persons are one and the same God). It does not assert that there are three individual substances which are one substance or that there are three gods which are also one god, either of which would be contradictory. That is, Christians are not saying that God is both one substance and not-one-substance, but rather that God is both one substance and three persons. Even if God's triunity cannot be fully comprehended by man, at least the Christian is not involved in a contradiction when he asserts that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God.

On the other hand, the Baha'i is required to accept that blatantly contradictory concepts of God were all infallibly revealed by God through his "manifestations." For instance, monotheism (what Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad taught) and polytheism (what Confucius and Zoroaster taught) cannot both be true, since it is contradictory to say both that there is only one god and that there is more than one god. Therefore, unlike the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and the Trinity, the Baha'i view of God implies mutually exclusive concepts of God.

BAHA'IS AND BIBLICAL PROPHECY

The Baha'is claim that Baha'u'llah is the fulfillment of the biblical prophecies of the return of Christ.⁹ Taken literally, of course, the biblical prophecies of Christ's return do not fit Baha'u'llah. The Bible speaks of Jesus Himself returning in the skies before the entire world in a cataclysmic fashion to judge the living and the dead (e.g., Matt. 24). By contrast, Baha'is recognized as the "Christ" another person (Baha'u'llah) who came into the world in relative obscurity through natural means (i.e., conception and birth).¹⁰

How, then, can the Baha'is claim that Bah'u'llah fulfills the biblical prophecies of Christ's return? They can do this only by insisting that the literal meaning is to be ignored. According to Baha'i doctrine, Jesus' description of His second coming in the Bible should be understood spiritually rather than literally. That is, the text of the Bible is said to have some symbolic meaning which is contrary to the ordinary meaning of the words used.

Literal and Symbolic

The Baha'is do not, however, follow this line of interpretation consistently in their reading of the Bible. Whenever they find a biblical passage that clearly states that Jesus will return at the end of the world in a way contrary to Baha'u'llah's arrival, the Baha'is simply assert that we should not take that passage literally. No reason for this assertion is ever produced from the text of the Bible itself. However, on other occasions where a literal interpretation might seem to the Baha'is to support their views (e.g., Dan. 8:13-17),¹¹ they do not consider interpreting the passage nonliterally.

This sort of clip-and-paste view of biblical interpretation proves very little. After all, by the same rationale one could "prove" that any number of different individuals was Christ returned. Accepting as literal only those texts which seem to fit one's doctrinal views while pleading for a nonliteral interpretation for passages which contradict one's position is a favorite tactic of pseudo-Christian groups. For example, this interpretive technique is employed by the Unification Church to show that Sun Myung Moon is the Messiah.¹²

With this method of interpreting biblical prophecy Baha'is employ circular reasoning (in which the arguer assumes what he or she is trying to prove). Because the Baha'i accepts Baha'u'llah's claim to fulfill Christ's second coming, he (or she) thinks he is justified in interpreting biblical prophecies symbolically which, if taken literally, would disprove Baha'u'llah's claim, but if taken nonliterally can be used to prove it.¹³ Thus, probably without even realizing it, the Baha'i is assuming the very point that he is trying to prove in his citing of biblical prophecy.

Jews, Christians, and Baha'is

In this article's introductory comments I mentioned Robert Stockman's assertion that just as the Jews were mistaken about Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (that is, the Jews as a nation; many individual Jews accepted Jesus), the Christians of today are mistaken about Baha'u'llah's fulfillment of New Testament prophecy. There are two ways of understanding this argument. Perhaps it is meant to be a proof that Baha'u'llah fulfills biblical prophecy, in which case the argument might be stated more formally in the following manner:

1. The Jews thought that Jesus was not the Messiah, and they were wrong.
2. Christians today think that Baha'u'llah was not the Messiah (or Christ returned).
3. Therefore, Christians are wrong to reject Baha'u'llah.

Such an argument, if that is what Robert Stockman intended, would certainly be another case of faulty reasoning. By this reasoning Christians and Baha'is alike would be wrong to reject Jim Jones as a manifestation of God, or Sun Myung Moon as the second coming of Christ. Clearly, the mere fact that the Jewish rejection of Jesus was unjustified does not prove that the Christian rejection of Baha'u'llah is also unjustified.

There is another way of interpreting Robert Stockman's argument, however, that is not so obviously fallacious. Perhaps he is intending to argue only that the Christian rejection of Baha'u'llah is based on the same sort of error that led the Jews to reject Jesus. Baha'is generally argue that in both cases the error that led to the rejection of the "manifestation" was an overly literal interpretation of biblical prophecies. Such an argument would take the following form:

1. The Jews rejected Jesus because they interpreted the Bible too literally.
2. Christians today reject Baha'u'llah because they interpret the Bible too literally.

3. Therefore, Christians are wrong to reject Baha'u'llah on the basis of their literal interpretation of the Bible.

This argument, unlike the one discussed previously, has some logical value. If its premises go unchallenged, they lend strong support to its conclusion. However, both of the premises of this argument *do* invite challenge.

In the case of the second premise, for Baha'u'llah one could substitute any of the other modern religious leaders claiming to be a manifestation of God or a fulfillment of the Second Coming of Christ. A follower of Sun Myung Moon could argue with equal validity as follows:

1. The Jews rejected Jesus because they interpreted the Bible too literally.
2. Christians today reject Rev. Moon because they interpret the Bible too literally.
3. Therefore, Christians are wrong to reject Rev. Moon on the basis of their literal interpretation of the Bible.

In other words, the second premise is really immaterial. It amounts to saying that if the actual words of the Bible are ignored, anyone at all can be claimed to be a fulfillment of the Bible's "spiritual" or symbolic meaning.

As for the first premise, as a matter of historical fact it is simply false. The fact of the matter is that the Jews rejected Jesus as the fulfillment of biblical prophecy not because they interpreted it too literally, but because they did not interpret it literally enough. The Bible clearly predicted that the Messiah would be God (Ps. 45:6; Isa. 7:14; 9:6), but the Jews found Jesus' claim to be God scandalous and blasphemous in the extreme. The Bible also clearly announced that the Messiah would suffer and be killed as an atonement for Israel's sins (Isa. 53; Dan. 9:26), but the Jews regarded Jesus' crucifixion as proof that He was not the Messiah.

Not every Old Testament passage applied to Jesus in the New Testament was understood by first-century Jews as referring to the Messiah. However, there were a fair number of Old Testament prophecies which Jewish leaders and scholars in the first century did regard as literal predictions concerning the Messiah and which were fulfilled literally by Jesus.¹⁴ Since Jesus fulfilled these prophecies, what caused most of His contemporaries not to recognize this?

The answer is that the Jews allowed their assumptions about the Messiah to color and even distort their reading of the biblical text. Specifically, it was their expectation of a conquering political Messiah which led first-century Jews to reject the literal meaning of the text, which presents the Messiah as *both* suffering *and* conquering.¹⁵ Consequently, they had a concept of the Messiah which Jesus could not fit. Their desire for a political Messiah incited them to ignore or twist biblical passages predicting a suffering Messiah that were literally fulfilled in Jesus.

Similarly, the assumption made by the Baha'is that Baha'u'llah is God's manifestation for this age leads to distortions in their reading of the New Testament. (At least the Jews had *some* warrant in the biblical text for their view of the Messiah; the Baha'is have *none*.) They too are forced to ignore or twist biblical passages concerning Christ (in this case those concerning His return), which they do in order to apply them to Baha'u'llah. Ironically, then, it turns out that Robert Stockman's argument actually has things turned around. The truth is that the Jews *rejected* Jesus as the Messiah for much the same sort of reason that Baha'is *accept* Baha'u'llah (which, in effect, is *also* rejecting Jesus): in both cases, religious assumptions about the Messiah interfered with a plain reading of the text. Like the Jews in Jesus' day, the Baha'is fail to interpret the Bible literally enough.

Also like the Jews, Baha'is are forced to explain why the Old Testament presents both a suffering and a conquering Messiah. The Baha'i answer is that the Old Testament really predicts two "Messiahs": Jesus was the suffering Messiah and Baha'u'llah the conquering one.¹⁶

This interpretation ignores the critical fact that both descriptions of the Messiah can be found within the same passages and are obviously referring to one person. For example, Daniel 9:25 calls the Messiah a "Prince" and 9:26 states that he will be "cut off," that is, killed.¹⁷ Jesus fulfilled in detail those prophecies referring to the Messiah's place of birth (Mic. 5:2), time of ministry (Dan. 9:24-27), death (Dan. 9:26; Isa. 53; Ps. 22), and resurrection (Ps. 16:10), as well as a number of others.¹⁸ Therefore, we should accept Jesus' claim (e.g., Matt. 24-25) and the teaching of the rest of the New Testament (e.g., Luke 1:33; Acts 1:9-11; 1 Thess. 4:14-17; Rev. 1:7; 22:16-21) that He will *personally* return to fulfill the remaining prophecies which describe a conquering Messiah.

Certainly there is no reason to accept Baha'u'llah's claim to be that Messiah. He failed to fulfill any of the biblical prophecies concerning Christ's second coming,¹⁹ and Baha'is cannot produce a single text from the Bible that suggests that Jesus will not Himself fulfill those prophecies.

The preceding discussion of the interpretation of biblical prophecy should be understood in the light of a more general appreciation of proper biblical interpretation.²⁰ In contrasting "literal" with "symbolic" interpretations, I am not suggesting that biblical symbolism should not be interpreted as such. Rather, I am simply saying that what is understood as symbolic and what is taken more literally should be based on the text itself (as when Daniel interprets his visions as symbols, or when Jesus interprets His parables as earthly illustrations of spiritual truths). Where the Baha'is go wrong is in reading into the Bible doctrines that are totally foreign to its text and can only be justified by assuming their truth.

BAHA'IS AND RELIGIOUS UNITY

The third Baha'i argument against Christianity that I wish to address is the claim that Baha'ism must be God's true religion for this age because, unlike Christianity, it has not suffered any schisms. One Baha'i writer takes this so far as to proclaim boldly that "there are not Baha'i sects. There never can be."²¹

There are two problems with this argument: (1) It rests on a false premise — Baha'ism has in fact suffered divisions. (2) The conclusion does not follow — an undivided religion is not necessarily the true religion.

Division in Baha'ism

First, the fact is that Baha'ism *has* suffered several divisions, from its early days to the present. One group, known as the Free Baha'is, has published a book denouncing Shoghi Effendi (who took over leadership of the Baha'i World Faith after Baha'u'llah's son 'Abdu'l-Baha died).²² Another group, the Orthodox Baha'i Faith, was formed after Shoghi Effendi died, and recognizes Jason Remy as Effendi's successor.²³ Yet another group, Baha'is Under the Provision of the Covenant (BUPC), is led by Montana chiropractor Dr. Leland Jensen. Though it has "Baha'i" in its name, it is not endorsed or recognized by the main body "as a legitimate Baha'i organization."²⁴ As Vernon Elvin Johnson concludes in his Baylor University dissertation on the history of Baha'ism, "obvious schism has occurred in the Baha'i religion, for various factions each claiming to belong to the Baha'i religion have existed in the course of the faith's history."²⁵

Some Baha'is may be tempted to counter that anyone who breaks off from the Baha'i World Faith is automatically not a Baha'i and therefore no schism has really occurred. Such an argument is circular in nature and commits what Antony Flew calls the "no-true-Scotsman" fallacy ("No Scotsman would do such a thing....Well, no *true* Scotsman would").²⁶ As Johnson points out, the Catholic and Mormon churches have used similar reasoning to defend their claim to be the one true church²⁷ (although the Catholic church no longer tends to take such an exclusive stance).

Division and Truth

Second, it simply does not follow that a religion that is undivided must be the true religion, or that a religion that is divided cannot be the true religion. For the Baha'i argument to be persuasive it must be shown, and not simply assumed, that the true religion must be unified organizationally. This is not a biblical teaching: unity of the faith is presented in the Bible as a *goal* for the church to reach, not a *prerequisite* for the church to be God's people (Eph. 4:11-16).

Since on independent grounds we know that Christianity is true (for example, the evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus,²⁸ which Baha'is deny²⁹), we may justifiably conclude that organizational unity is not a requirement for a religion to be true. The argument can be stated more formally as follows:

1. Either the true religion is unified or it is not.
2. Christianity is the true religion and it is not unified.
3. Therefore, the true religion is not unified.

The truth of Christianity is independent of whether its adherents congregate under the same organizational banner. Its truth depends rather on the truth of the Bible's teachings concerning the person, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is not to deny that Christians have an obligation to exhibit unity and love as a testimony to the world of the truth of Jesus Christ (John 13:34-35; 17:21-23). To our shame we confess that although *Christianity* is true, *Christians* have not always been true to Christ. Nevertheless, this does not alter the fact that Jesus Christ is the only Savior from sin and God's last word to man prior to the consummation of history (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; Heb. 1:1-3; 13:8). On this basis Christianity stands vindicated as true and Baha'ism stands condemned as a rejection of God's truth as revealed in Jesus Christ.

NOTES

¹ The only book-length Christian critiques of Baha'ism in print are Francis J. Beckwith, *Baha'i* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1985), which focuses on doctrine, and William McElwee Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teachings* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publications, 1984), which focuses on history.

² This is the current list of the manifestations. The Baha'is have altered the list over the years. See Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i-Iqan: The Book of Certitude*, 2d ed., trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust [hereafter "BPT"], 1950), 7-65; `Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, trans. Laura Clifford Barney (BPT, 1930), 189; and a current Baha'i tract, *One Universal Faith* (BPT, n.d.), 5.

³ Personal letter from Steven McConnell, 1 June 1987.

⁴ See Beckwith, 8, and works cited there.

⁵ This table is based on Beckwith, 17.

⁶ Concerning God's relation to the universe, Baha'i writer J. E. Esslemont writes, "Baha'u'llah teaches that the universe is without beginning in time. It is a perpetual emanation from the Great First Cause." J. E. Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 3d ed. (BPT, 1970), 204. It should be noted that it is untenable both philosophically and scientifically to maintain that the universe is without a beginning. See J. P. Moreland, *Scaling the Secular City: A Defense of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 18-42, and works cited there; and Francis J. Beckwith, *David Hume's Argument Against Miracles: A Critical Analysis* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1989), chapter 5.

⁷ McConnell, 2.

⁸ For example, Thomas V. Morris, *The Logic of God Incarnate* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986).

- ⁹ See `Abdu'l-Baha, 110-12.
- ¹⁰ Esslemont, 214.
- ¹¹ On this and other so-called Baha'i biblical prophecies, see Beckwith, *Baha'i*, 28-39.
- ¹² See James Bjornstad, *Sun Myung Moon and the Unification Church*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), 19-52.
- ¹³ See, for example, Esslemont, 222-26; `Abdu'l-Baha, 110-12.
- ¹⁴ See Norman L. Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 340-41; Josh McDowell, *Evidence That Demands a Verdict*, rev. ed. (San Bernardino, CA: Here's Life Publishers, 1979), 141-77.
- ¹⁵ See Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Jesus Was a Jew* (San Antonio, TX: Ariel Ministries, 1981), 23-64.
- ¹⁶ For example, see Esslemont, 214-16; see also Beckwith, *Baha'i*, 35-37.
- ¹⁷ See for further reading, Fruchtenbaum, 23-24; Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 160-80.
- ¹⁸ See n. 14.
- ¹⁹ See Beckwith, *Baha'i*, 23-25.
- ²⁰ See especially James Sire, *Scripture Twisting: 20 Ways the Cults Misread the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1980).
- ²¹ David Hofman, *The Renewal of Civilization*, Talisman Books (London: George Ronald, 1960), 110.
- ²² Hermann Zimmer, *A Fraudulent Testament Devalues the Bahai Religion into Political Shogism*, trans. Jeannine Blackwell, rev. Karen Gasser and Gordon Campbell (Waiblingen/Stuttgart: World Union for Universal Religion and Universal Peace — Free Bahais, 1973).
- ²³ Vernon Elvin Johnson, *An Historical Analysis of Critical Transformations in the Evolution of the Baha'i World Faith* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1974), 362-80.
- ²⁴ Joel Bjorling, "Leland Jensen: The Prophet Who Cried 'Wolf,'" *Understanding Cults and Spiritual Movements* 1, 3 (1985):6.
- ²⁵ Johnson, 410.
- ²⁶ Antony Flew, *Thinking Straight* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1975), 47.
- ²⁷ Johnson, 412.
- ²⁸ On the evidence for the resurrection, see especially William Lane Craig, *Knowing the Truth about the Resurrection* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1988), and Gary Habermas, *The Resurrection of Jesus: An Apologetic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980).
- ²⁹ See Beckwith, *Baha'i*, 14, 25-26.