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Essay

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl and the Emergence of Bahá'í Intellectual Discourse

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Abstract

Marking the 150th anniversary of Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání's declaration as a Bahá'í, this article offers a retrospective account of his development as one of the leading intellectual figures of the first Bahá'í century. It follows his movement from the madrasas of Qajar Iran through Central Asia and Cairo to the emerging Bahá'í communities of Europe and North America. Particular attention is given to the continuity between his Islamic scholarly formation and his later work in defense of the Bahá'í revelation. Conversion did not lead him to abandon the habits of argument in which he had been trained; instead, he redirected them toward a new theological purpose. The sources and emphases of his writing changed as he moved between Muslim, Christian, and Western Bahá'í audiences. Yet his work remained grounded in a consistent understanding of scripture and religious history. Viewed across his career, Abu'l-Faḍl emerges as a central figure in the development of Bahá'í intellectual discourse, one whose scholarship could cross religious and cultural boundaries without surrendering its theological coherence.

Introduction

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání continues to stand as one of the most significant intellectual figures of the first Bahá'í century, helping to articulate and defend the Bahá'í teachings in the contested religious environment at the turn of the twentieth century. This year marks the 150th anniversary of Abu'l-Faḍl's declaration as a Bahá'í in 1876, providing a fitting occasion to revisit his intellectual formation and the continuing impact of his work. Rigorously trained in his native Shia scholarly tradition, he used this skillset to engage with learned Muslims of many backgrounds, before eventually engaging in intense dialogue with Christian and Western audiences in the final two decades before his death. His arguments, though pointed at times, always remained grounded in scripture, reason, and an earnest desire to seek the truth. In works such as *The Brilliant Proof*, *Miracles and Metaphors*, *Farā'id*, and *The Bahá'í Proofs*, Abu'l-Faḍl drew upon the Quran and the Bible to render the Bahá'í revelation in terms intelligible across the religious divide, all while engaging with the intellectual challenges from an increasingly secular paradigm. Though he was not the first scholar who advanced the Faith through the pen and argument, his work has been foundational for all Bahá'í scholars who have come after him.

When trying to make sense of his life and impact as a Bahá'í scholar, it is vital to have a sense of the intellectual and religious background from which he emerged. Though late nineteenth century Iran, just as today, was the most powerful and influential bastion of Shia Islamic orthodoxy, it was increasingly becoming contested territory. Christian — and especially Protestant — missionaries were a common enough sight in Persia, and though they were not very successful at making converts among the Muslim masses, their presence nevertheless reflected the expanding

political, cultural, and intellectual influence of the Christian West. More significantly, their activity introduced a degree of missionary and intellectual pressure that the clerical establishment in Iran had not faced in centuries. This renewed engagement between the faiths led to an atmosphere of both polemic and reform, as the Islamic establishment sought to defend their flock against foreign influence and to grapple with broader questions concerning religious authority, education, reason, and modernity. Like many parts of the Muslim world at that time, Iran witnessed growing agreement that some sort of religious and political reform was necessary, though there was little consensus regarding what such reform should entail.[1]

From Madrasa to Bahá'í Intellectual, 1844–1894

It is into this milieu that Mirza Abu'l-Faḍl emerged. Born to a family of religious scholars near the town of Gulpáygán in Iran in 1844 (only weeks after both the Declaration of the Báb and the birth of 'Abdu'l-Bahá), Abu'l-Faḍl received a traditional education grounded in the Qur'anic sciences, hadith, theology, logic, and philosophy. This kind of training was rigorous and argument-centred, preparing students to both preserve and explain inherited traditions. Abu'l-Fadl excelled in this environment from an early age, developing a reputation for quick-thinking and a love of detail, soon becoming a teacher at his college and by the time he turned thirty, its head.

This background would prove decisive for his later role within the Bahá'í community. Unlike many early Bahá'í teachers whose authority derived primarily from spiritual charisma, personal sacrifice, or close association with central figures of the Faith, Abu'l-Faḍl's influence rested heavily upon scholarship and argumentation. Even after his acceptance of the claims of Bahá'u'lláh, he continued to operate intellectually within the habits of mind formed through his earlier Islamic training. His later writings consistently reflect the structure and style of classical scholarly discourse: objections are identified and categorized, scriptural texts are carefully interpreted, and arguments are presented through systematic reasoning rather than rhetorical flourish alone. In many respects, his significance lies precisely in this continuity. His conversion to the Bahá'í Faith did not erase his earlier intellectual formation so much as redirect it toward a new theological horizon.

Like many educated Muslims of his generation, Abu'l-Faḍl initially approached the Bahá'í movement with scepticism. The Bábí and Bahá'í movements were viewed by much of the Shia establishment as deeply threatening, both theologically and socially, and association with them could carry serious consequences. His eventual acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith appears to have emerged gradually through investigation, discussion, and prolonged engagement with Bahá'í claims rather than through sudden emotional conversion. Later Bahá'í accounts frequently recount a now-famous encounter in which a Bahá'í farrier, while reshoeing Abu'l-Faḍl's donkey during a journey with fellow seminarians, challenged him with a simple question concerning apparently contradictory hadith traditions.[2] The first tradition held that an angel accompanies every raindrop to earth, while another held that angels do not enter a house where a dog is kept. If both were true, the farrier asked, how could rain fall on houses where dogs lived? This inconsistency greatly

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1 For Qajar Iran's nineteenth-century intellectual and educational reform debates, see Monica M. Ringer, *Education, Religion, and the Discourse of Cultural Reform in Qajar Iran* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2001).

2 See, for example, Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Volume 3: 'Akka, The Early Years 1868-77* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1984); see also Amin Banani, introduction to Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, *Miracles and Metaphors*, trans. Juan Ricardo Cole (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1981), pp. ix–xiv.

unsettled Abu'l-Faḍl and helped prompt his sustained investigation of the Bahá'í cause. Whether embellished in retelling or not, the story captures something important about Abu'l-Faḍl's intellectual disposition: he appears to have been deeply unsettled not by emotional appeal alone, but by questions that exposed tensions within inherited assumptions which compelled further inquiry.

His public recognition of the Bahá'u'lláh came at considerable personal cost. Like many early Bahá'ís in Iran, Abu'l-Faḍl experienced periods of social isolation, opposition, and long stretches of imprisonment. It entailed the loss of status, livelihood, and scholarly credibility within the wider Islamic establishment. Yet these experiences also helped shape the distinctive tone of his later apologetic work. His writings frequently reveal a scholar deeply conscious of the objections raised against the Bahá'í revelation and eager to address them seriously and systematically rather than dismissively — though his tone could be quite aggressive on occasion. This tendency would eventually become one of the defining features of his intellectual method.

From 1876 through the early 1890s, Abu'l-Faḍl travelled and taught across Iran and Central Asia. By the late 1880s he had reached Ashgabat in Russian Turkmenistan, engaging Muslim audiences through forms of argument familiar from the Islamic scholarly culture of that time.[3] Already, one can see the systematic nature of his themes, ranging from what we would now call progressive revelation, the reinterpretation of prophecy, and utilizing a shared scriptural framework drawing upon both Islamic and Biblical traditions. During his time in Samarkand and Bukhara, however, the decline of these formerly vibrant centres of Islamic learning along with what he considered the failure of his direct teaching left him deeply discouraged, a feeling compounded by news of Bahá'u'lláh's passing in 1892. In 1894, 'Abdu'l-Bahá called him to the Holy Land and subsequently sent him to Egypt.

Cairo and the Emergence of a Public Bahá'í Scholar, 1894–1900

If Abu'l-Faḍl's conversion marked his transition from a Muslim scholar to a Bahá'í intellectual, his years in Cairo transformed him into one of the first major public scholars of the Bahá'í Faith. Cairo at the turn of the twentieth century occupied a unique place within the intellectual life of the Middle East. Although Egypt remained nominally under Ottoman sovereignty, it was increasingly shaped by European political influence, modern educational reforms, print culture, and the growing circulation of new religious and philosophical ideas. It was also becoming one of the major centres of Arab intellectual life, attracting reformers, journalists, religious scholars, and political thinkers from across the region. Questions concerning the relationship between religion and modernity, revelation and reason, and Islam and the West were being debated with unusual intensity.[4]

Importantly, many of these debates overlapped with the same reformist currents already reshaping parts of the wider Muslim world. Thinkers associated with the broader Islamic modernist movement sought to reconcile Islamic thought with modern science, rational inquiry, constitutionalism, and educational reform, while also resisting what they perceived as the growing political and cultural dominance of Europe. Yet these reform movements often disagreed sharply

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3 For the classical Islamic tradition of juridical dialectic (jadal) that formed part of this broader scholarly culture, see Walter Edward Young, *The Dialectical Forge: Juridical Disputation and the Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cham: Springer, 2017).

4 For Egypt's intellectual and institutional transformation in this period, see Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); and Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

regarding both method and authority. Some advocated selective reinterpretation within the existing Islamic tradition, while others pursued more sweeping critiques of inherited structures of religious authority.[5] It was into this intellectually fluid and often polemical environment that Abu'l-Faḍl entered.

His arrival in Cairo proved significant for several reasons. First, it placed him within one of the most vibrant publishing and intellectual centres in the Arabic-speaking world. Second, it allowed him to engage publicly not only with Muslim scholars, but increasingly with Christians, Orientalists, and reformist intellectuals. Finally, Cairo provided the setting in which Abu'l-Faḍl's role within the Bahá'í community evolved from that of a learned convert and teacher into something closer to a public-facing representative of the Faith itself, though he was not explicit about his affiliation during the beginning of his time there.

Abu'l-Faḍl did not approach these debates primarily as a polemicist in the traditional sense, although he could write sharply against opponents when necessary. His broader strategy was often apologetic in the older meaning of the term: an attempt to demonstrate the intellectual coherence and historical legitimacy of the Bahá'í Faith before educated audiences shaped by both Islamic scholarship and modern intellectual pressures. This helps explain why his writings so frequently appealed to history, textual analysis, and reasoned argumentation rather than relying primarily on devotional or mystical language. Indeed, much of his work reflects the mindset of someone deeply trained in the methods of Islamic scholarly discourse, even while arriving at novel conclusions.

It should be noted that Abu'l-Faḍl's method should not be reduced to simply a form of "Islamic modernism" in Bahá'í packaging. While he shared an interest in reason, education, and engagement with modern intellectual currents with other reformers such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad 'Abduh, and Rashid Rida,[6] his central concern was ultimately theological rather than merely political or civilizational. The Bahá'í Faith, as he tirelessly articulated, was not simply a reform movement within Islam, nor merely an ethical modernization project, but the latest stage in an ongoing process of divine revelation. This conviction fundamentally shaped the way he approached questions of religious history, scriptural interpretation, and social transformation.

These themes became especially visible in the controversies that surrounded his public activity in Egypt. Abu'l-Faḍl's prominence, combined with his scholarly credentials and growing reputation, attracted both admiration and hostility. Muslim critics viewed the Bahá'í Faith as a dangerous theological deviation, particularly because of its claims concerning revelation after Islam. Christian missionaries, meanwhile, sometimes saw the Bahá'í Faith as a rival religious

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5 See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, especially chs 5–9; and Malcolm H. Kerr, *Islamic Reform: The Political and Legal Theories of Muhammad 'Abduh and Rashid Rida* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

6 Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/39–1897) was a political activist and advocate of Muslim solidarity; Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905), an Egyptian jurist and later grand mufti, pursued religious and educational reform and met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Beirut in 1887, subsequently corresponding with him; and Rashid Rida (1865–1935), 'Abduh's Syrian-born disciple and editor of *al-Manar*, developed his mentor's reformism in a more scripturalist direction and helped shape later Salafi thought, particularly through his defense of the Wahhabi movement. See Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, chs 5–9; William F. McCants, "'I Never Understood Any of This from 'Abbās Effendi': 'Abduh's Knowledge of the Bahá'í Teachings and His Friendship with 'Abdu'l-Bahá' 'Abbās," in *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious Movements and the Bābī-Bahā'ī Faiths*, ed. Moshe Sharon (Leiden: Brill, 2004), pp. 275–297; and Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), ch. 2.

movement capable of appealing to educated Muslims dissatisfied with traditional structures but unwilling to convert to Christianity. Abu'l-Faḍl thus found himself positioned within overlapping religious disputes that reflected the broader anxieties of the age: revelation and finality, tradition and reform, East and West, religion and modernity.

It was during this Cairo period that many of his most influential works either emerged or gained wider circulation. Among these were *Farā'id*[7] and *Miracles and Metaphors,*[8] texts that sought to defend the claims of the Bahá'í Faith through close engagement with Islamic sources, prophecy traditions, and historical argumentation. Notably, these works were often addressed to educated audiences already familiar with Islamic scholarly discourse. Abu'l-Faḍl's arguments therefore tended to proceed internally, attempting to demonstrate inconsistencies within inherited interpretations while simultaneously advancing a Bahá'í reading of sacred history.

His style of argumentation also reflected a broader transition taking place within the Bahá'í community itself. Earlier generations of Bábí and Bahá'í believers had frequently operated under conditions of intense persecution, where survival and internal consolidation were primary concerns.[9] Abu'l-Faḍl, by contrast, helped articulate the Faith within increasingly global and intellectual contexts. In this sense, he served not merely as a defender of the Bahá'í Faith, but as one of the earliest figures to systematically present it as a religion capable of participating in modern intellectual discourse on equal footing with other major religious and philosophical traditions.

Europe, America, and the Translation of Bahá'í Thought, 1900–1904

If Cairo established Abu'l-Faḍl as a major Bahá'í intellectual within the broader Muslim world, his later travels to Europe and North America extended this role into an entirely new religious and cultural environment. The Bahá'í communities emerging in the West at the turn of the twentieth century differed substantially from the Persian and Arab contexts in which Abu'l-Faḍl had previously operated. Many early Western converts approached the Bahá'í Faith through the eclectic religious environment of the late nineteenth century, where interest in spiritualism, comparative religion, Theosophy, and universalist ideas often overlapped.[10] As a result, the early Western Bahá'í community frequently possessed considerable spiritual enthusiasm while lacking a stable and coherent understanding of Bahá'í doctrine, history, and authority.

These tensions became especially visible in the crisis surrounding Ibrahim Kheiralla, one of the earliest and most successful Bahá'í teachers in the United States. Kheiralla played an undeniably important role in introducing large numbers of Americans to the Bahá'í Faith, yet his presentations increasingly incorporated esoteric speculation and interpretations that reflected his own developing ideas, together with claims to authority that placed him at odds with the leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.[11] Importantly, this conflict was not simply a matter of personal disagreement. It reflected a broader uncertainty regarding how the Bahá'í Faith itself was to be understood within

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7 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, *Farā'id* (Cairo: Maṭba'at Hindiyya, 1898).

8 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, *Miracles and Metaphors*, trans. by Juan Ricardo Cole (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1981).

9 For broader histories of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, see Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

10 See Kathryn Jewett Hogenson, *Lighting the Western Sky: The Hearst Pilgrimage and the Establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in the West* (Oxford: George Ronald, 2022).

11 See Robert Stockman, "The Bahá'ís of the United States," in *Introduction to New and Alternative Religions in America*, ed. Eugene V. Gallagher and W. Ashcraft (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), pp. 191–193.

Western intellectual and religious categories. Was it primarily mystical? Philosophical? Esoteric? A reform movement? A universal spirituality? Or a distinct revealed religion with its own theological and historical claims? These questions remained only partially settled within many early Western Bahá'í circles.

It was within this atmosphere that Abu'l-Faḍl was asked by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to travel West. His mission was not merely pastoral or organizational, though it certainly involved elements of both. Rather, Abu'l-Faḍl increasingly functioned as an intellectual stabilizing force whose task was to clarify, explain, and systematize Bahá'í teachings for audiences often encountering the Faith through highly eclectic religious frameworks. In this respect, his work in Europe and America represented a continuation of the same broader project already visible in Cairo: the attempt to explain Bahá'í teachings within new intellectual environments without merely conforming them to the assumptions of those environments.

This process was not always easy, especially where converts expected psychic or occult experiences. Thornton Chase recalled that the instruction offered by Abu'l-Faḍl and Mírzá Asadu'lláh was "thoroughly sane and practical" and so insistent upon righteousness and right living that many people who had "conceived views imbued with imaginations and superstitions" fell away, while those who remained discovered its spiritual depth.[12] Abu'l-Faḍl's lectures, classes, correspondence, and conversations thus helped provide a more coherent intellectual framework through which the Bahá'í Faith could be understood as more than a loose spiritual movement or mystical philosophy.

Importantly, Abu'l-Faḍl did not simply transplant Islamic scholarly discourse into Western settings unchanged. Rather, his method adapted itself to new audiences while retaining its underlying structure. When addressing Muslim audiences, he often argued primarily through Qur'anic interpretation, hadith traditions, and other traditionally Islamic categories. In the West, however, Biblical themes, questions of religious history, and broader philosophical concerns became increasingly prominent. This shift can be seen clearly in works such as *the Bahá'í Proofs,*[13] which became one of the earliest major attempts to articulate the Bahá'í Faith systematically for Western readers.

The importance of *the Bahá'í Proofs* within early Western Bahá'í intellectual history is difficult to overstate. Although later works such as John Esslemont's *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*[14] would eventually become more widely read introductory texts, Abu'l-Faḍl's writings helped establish an earlier intellectual foundation upon which many later explanations of the Faith would build. In contrast to highly esoteric or purely devotional presentations, this volume sought to demonstrate the coherence of Bahá'í teachings through structured argument, scriptural reasoning, and historical analysis. The work repeatedly attempts to situate the Bahá'í revelation within a broader sacred history linking Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the modern world. In doing so, Abu'l-Faḍl helped articulate a specifically Bahá'í way of understanding religious continuity that differed both from exclusivist missionary models and from more diffuse forms of spiritual universalism.

At a deeper level, Abu'l-Faḍl's Western mission reflected a larger transition taking place within the Bahá'í community itself. Earlier generations of believers had often existed under conditions of

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[12] Thornton Chase, quoted in the foreword to Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, *The Bahá'í Proofs* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), pp. vi–vii.

[13] Abu'l-Faḍl, *The Bahá'í Proofs*.

[14] J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2006; first published 1923).

persecution and marginalization, particularly within Iran. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, the Bahá'í Faith was increasingly becoming a global religious movement whose audiences extended far beyond its original Persian and Islamic context. This transition required not only translation between languages, but also translation between intellectual worlds. Abu'l-Faḍl became one of the first Bahá'í scholars capable of carrying the Faith across these boundaries while preserving a recognizable sense of theological coherence and historical continuity.

Scripture, Reason, and Apologetics

The chronological account above brings the broader features of Abu'l-Faḍl's method into clearer view. What makes Abu'l-Faḍl particularly interesting as an early Bahá'í intellectual is not merely *what* he argued, but *how* he argued. For instance, he did not approach either Islam or Christianity from an imagined neutral standpoint outside the traditions themselves. Rather, his arguments typically proceeded from within shared scriptural and theological worlds, drawing simultaneously upon the Quran, hadith, the Bible, prophecy traditions, and rational argumentation in order to articulate a Bahá'í understanding of religious history. In this respect, his work reflects both his deep formation within Islamic scholarly discourse and the increasingly interreligious environment in which he operated.

A recurring feature of Abu'l-Faḍl's writings is his tendency to argue through inherited religious language rather than against it. This is particularly evident in works such as *The Brilliant Proof,*[15] where his arguments frequently depend upon internal critique and reinterpretation rather than wholesale rejection of the "other". Unlike Christian and Muslim debaters, who routinely dismiss the other's scripture as being corrupted or even demonic, Abu'l-Faḍl instead attempts to demonstrate how these texts, when properly understood, point toward the legitimacy of the Bahá'í revelation, and indeed, even confirm each other. A key premise of his work is that earlier scripture retains legitimacy and continuing importance, even while arguing that the inherited *interpretations* of these texts have often become rigid, incomplete, or historically constrained. This helps explain why his writings move so fluidly between Qur'anic passages, hadith traditions, Biblical prophecy, and broader historical argumentation. For Abu'l-Faḍl, the problem was never revelation *per se*, but the tendency of religious communities to equate later theological developments with the original guidance itself, thereby excluding the ability of God to ever act outside of those manmade bounds.

For example, when Peter Easton relies upon hostile missionary testimony against Bahá'u'lláh, Abu'l-Faḍl treats the issue as one of evidentiary fairness. He argues that a competent judge should not rely upon one side alone, but should weigh hostile and favourable accounts together; he then asks Christians to apply to claims about Bahá'u'lláh the same standard they expect when assessing hostile accounts of Jesus.[16]

Abu'l-Faḍl's style of apologetics was highly structured and generally systematic in tone. As in much classical Islamic disputation literature, objections are often identified explicitly, categorized, and then addressed point by point through textual and logical rebuttal. This tendency becomes particularly visible in *The Brilliant Proof*, written partly in response to Christian missionary criticism. Rather than merely denouncing his opponents, Abu'l-Faḍl generally attempts to expose internal inconsistencies within the arguments themselves while simultaneously advancing a Bahá'í interpretation of sacred history. Using comparative reasoning, Abu'l-Faḍl repeatedly juxtaposes Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith, not in order to flatten their distinctions, but to

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15 Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, *The Brilliant Proof* (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1998).

16 Abu'l-Faḍl, *The Brilliant Proof*, pp. 9–14.

situate them within a broader narrative of progressive revelation and religious renewal, one in which successive revelations are understood historically and illuminate one another rather than existing as isolated dispensations.

A second example appears in his discussion of prophecy. He places Jewish objections to Christian claims about Jesus, Christian objections to Muhammad, and Muslim claims concerning the corruption of the Gospel in parallel, arguing that each community treats inherited prophecies as self-evident until they are applied to a later revelation. The comparison exposes a recurring interpretive asymmetry: communities defend the authority of their own scripture while using literalism or claims of corruption to exclude later claimants.[17]

These tendencies become especially pronounced in *Miracles and Metaphors*, where Abu'l-Faḍl grapples directly with questions surrounding miracles, scriptural interpretation, and religious authority. Here we see more clearly the extent to which his thought had been shaped not only by interreligious polemic, but also by modern intellectual pressures concerning reason, science, and historical criticism. Significantly, Abu'l-Faḍl does not simply reject miracles outright, nor does he rely heavily upon supernatural spectacle as the primary proof of revelation. Instead, he frequently redirects attention toward the revelatory text itself, the transformative power of religion, and the deeper symbolic significance of scriptural narratives.[18]

This move was not unique to Abu'l-Faḍl, of course. Broader nineteenth-century reformist currents within both Islam and Christianity increasingly attempted to reconcile inherited religious traditions with modern rational sensibilities, often by emphasizing symbolic or moral readings of miraculous accounts. Yet Abu'l-Faḍl's approach remained distinctively Bahá'í in orientation: miracles are not primarily isolated wonders demanded as proofs, but signs whose significance ultimately points back to revelation itself. The enduring miracle is therefore not simply a supernatural event located in the distant past, but the power of the revealed word itself — its ability to establish a community, shed light on previous scriptures, and bring about lasting historical transformation. In this respect, Abu'l-Faḍl consistently attempts to shift the centre of religious authority away from sensationalism and toward revelation, interpretation, and historical continuity.

It would be a mistake, however, to characterize Abu'l-Faḍl simply as a rationalist attempting to demythologize religion. His writings repeatedly insist upon the reality of revelation, divine guidance, prophecy, and spiritual transformation. Reason, for Abu'l-Faḍl, serves primarily as a tool for clarifying and defending revelation rather than replacing it. Indeed, one of the more consistent features of his thought is the attempt to demonstrate that revelation and reason properly understood are ultimately harmonious rather than opposed.

Another important dimension of Abu'l-Faḍl's work is the degree to which his style of argument adapts itself to differing audiences. When addressing Muslim readers, his arguments frequently rely upon Qur'anic categories, hadith traditions, prophecy interpretation, and internal Islamic debates concerning authority and revelation. When responding to Christian critics, by contrast, he increasingly engages Biblical interpretation, missionary arguments, and questions surrounding miracles and scriptural consistency. His writings directed toward early Western Bahá'í audiences likewise display notable shifts in emphasis, often placing greater stress upon clarification, systematic explanation, and the intellectual coherence of Bahá'í teachings within a modern religious context.

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17 Abu'l-Faḍl, *The Brilliant Proof*, pp. 31–39.

18 Mirza Abu'l-Faḍl, *Miracles and Metaphors*, pp. 99–114.

This audience-sensitive approach helps explain why Abu'l-Faḍl's writings can sometimes appear quite different in tone depending upon the context in which they were produced. Yet beneath these differences lies a remarkably consistent intellectual method: scripture interpreted through scripture, revelation understood progressively through history, and religious argument carried out within shared textual and theological worlds rather than outside them. It was exactly this combination of traditional scholarly formation, comparative scriptural reasoning, and flexible apologetic strategy that made Abu'l-Faḍl such an important figure in the development of early Bahá'í intellectual discourse.

Conclusion: Legacy within Bahá'í Intellectual History

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl occupies a seminal place in Bahá'í history and scholarship. Emerging from the scholarly culture of late Qajar Iran, he became one of the first Bahá'í intellectuals to operate consistently across multiple religious and intellectual worlds. Whether engaging Muslim scholars in Cairo, responding to Christian missionary criticism, or helping clarify the Faith for Western audiences, his writings reveal a sustained concern for coherence, historical continuity, and serious engagement with inherited religious traditions. Although many of the particular controversies to which he responded belong to the concerns of his own age, the broader posture his work embodied proved more enduring. He demonstrated that Bahá'í thought could engage previous scriptures, modern intellectual currents, and competing religious claims with both conviction and seriousness. His importance lies not merely in the arguments themselves, but in the religious worlds within which he learned to argue and the new intellectual horizons those arguments helped open. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá remarked in a memorial address, Abu'l-Faḍl "lived in order to dig out of the rich mine of his heart and intellect nuggets of brilliant proofs, conclusive arguments and glorious expositions of the ideals of the Kingdom."[19]

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[19] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, memorial address recorded in Mírzá Aḥmad Sohráb's diary, in Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, *The Bahá'í Proofs*, p. 22.

Author biography

Caleb Gilleland is a scholar of comparative theology whose work brings Bahá'í thought into conversation with Christianity and Islam. He earned his PhD at the University of Edinburgh, where he re-examined the Apostle Paul through recent Pauline scholarship, exploring its implications for Bahá'í theology and Christian-Muslim dialogue. His current research considers sin, atonement, and progressive revelation from a Bahá'í perspective. He has taught courses on Paul, Jesus, and the Gospels and spoken at academic conferences, public events, and in broadcast media. His work uses narrative and historical approaches to make complex theology accessible and foster deeper understanding across religious traditions.