

# The Baha'i Faith and the Perennial Mystical Quest: A Western Perspective

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## Abstract

*The author analyses a definition of mysticism formulated by William Ralph Inge and western ideas on mystical experience. Then he proceeds to discuss mysticism as an intrinsic aspect of the Baha'i Faith and mystical experience as expounded in the Baha'i writings. The latter pay greater attention to the practical and logical aspects of mysticism than to the visionary and illogical ones. The author examines some of the reasons for Baha'i and non-Baha'i criticism of mysticism and suggests a Baha'i definition of mysticism. He then attempts to describe the Baha'i mystical path, as expounded by the Universal House of Justice.*

## Keywords

Baha'i mysticism  
William Ralph Inge  
spirituality  
mystical experience  
insight or intuition  
communion  
holiness

## A definition of mysticism

Most western scholars agree on the fact that it is difficult to define the word 'mysticism', and ascribe this difficulty to several factors.<sup>1</sup> In the first place, the term 'mystic' has been given different meanings in different centuries. In the second place, mysticism is a complex and polymorphic phenomenon, which is fundamentally religious in nature but has been studied from different perspectives: literary, historical, sociological, psychological, philosophical, theological and theosophical. In the third place, mysticism has been manifested in a variety of ways throughout history. For example, the forms of mysticism in nascent religions are quite different from those typical of the periods of spiritual decline in the historical development of religions. As to the former, the German Jesuit theologian Josef Sudbrack observes that '[a]t the historical (or prehistoric) ... outset of a religious experience there is an emotion which no one could escape; all were so deeply concerned with religion that we should say: all were mystics'.<sup>2</sup> As to the latter, in those periods of spiritual decline '[t]he protective walls of traditional religions crumble',<sup>3</sup> therefore mysticism is an 'elite'<sup>4</sup> phenomenon arising from 'the awareness that beliefs have lost their meanings' and from the resulting 'intense tension between faith in the Ineffable and the instruments offered by religion', and so mystics 'speak the language of the night' typical of 'the cultural and religious conditions of their world'.<sup>5</sup> In the fourth place, many authors have described mysticism in terms of a particular kind of personal experience, which they call 'mystical experience', and about which they say that it 'defies expression, that no adequate report of its contents can be given in words'.<sup>6</sup> Last but not least, mysticism is a living experience and thus '[n]o definition of religious mysticism in general abstract terms is ever satisfactory. At its best it misses the vivid reality of a genuine mystical experience, somewhat as one misses the reality of motion when one stops a spinning top to see what motion is like'.<sup>7</sup>

1. Adapted from a paper presented at the first conference of the Italian Association for Baha'i Studies, Acuto (Frosinone), 7–9 June 2002.
2. Josef Sudbrack, *Mystik. Selbsterfahrung, Kosmische Erfahrung, Gotteserfahrung* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1988); Italian translation: *Mistica* (Casale Monferrato [Alessandria]: Edizioni Piemme, 1992) 13 [English translation by the author].
3. Sudbrack, *Mistica* 13 [English translation by the author].
4. Sudbrack, *Mistica* 13 [English translation by the author].
5. Joseph Beaudé, *La Mystique* [Mysticism] (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1990); Italian translation: *La mistica* (Cinisello Balsamo [Milan]: Edizioni

- Paoline, 1992) 37, 98 [English translation by the author].
6. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Glasgow: Collins, 1985) 367.
  7. Rufus M. Jones, *The Flowering of Mysticism: The Friends of God in the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Macmillan, 1939) 250.
  8. Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: The Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1993) 72.
  9. William Ralph Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (Montana, USA: Kessinger Publishing Company, [n.d.]) 5.
  10. Baha'u'llah, *Muntakhabātī az thār-i Ḥaḍrat-i Bahā'u'llāh* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Baha'i-Verlag, 1984) 53; English translation: *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, rev. edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1952) 70. Among the Sufis the Arabic word 'irfān denoted mystic or initiatory knowledge. As to ḥaqq, see below, note 22.
  11. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 8 December 1935, in *Bahā'ī News* 102 (August 1936) 3.
  12. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* 3, 6–8.
  13. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions* (trans. Laura Clifford-Barney, 3rd edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1957) 227.

All these factors explain why, as Evelyn Underhill (1875–1941), the celebrated Anglican author on mysticism, writes, the word 'mysticism' has been

impartially applied to the performances of mediums and the ecstasies of the saints, to 'menticulture' and sorcery, dreamy poetry and mediaeval art, to prayer and palmistry, the doctrinal excesses of Gnosticism, and the tepid speculations of the Cambridge Platonists – even, according to William James, to the higher branches of intoxication.<sup>8</sup>

A definition of mysticism has been formulated by the British divine William Ralph Inge (1860–1954) as follows: 'the attempt to realize the presence of the living God in the soul and in nature'.<sup>9</sup> If this definition is accepted, among many other feasible and possible ones, the goal of mysticism is the same as the purpose of human life described by Baha'u'llah: 'to know [one's] Creator (*'irfān-i ḥaqq*) and to attain His Presence'.<sup>10</sup> No wonder, then, that Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, has said that the Baha'i Faith, 'like all other Divine Religions, is ... fundamentally mystic in character'.<sup>11</sup>

### The foundations of mysticism

Inge lists, in his exposition of the 'general characteristics of mysticism', the following four propositions on which, in his opinion, all forms of mysticism rest:

1. 'the soul ... can see and perceive';
2. 'man, in order to know God, must be a partaker of the Divine nature';
3. '“Without holiness no man may see the Lord”';
4. 'The true hierophant (expounder of the sacred) of the mysteries of God is love.'<sup>12</sup>

These propositions are an essential part of the Baha'i teachings.

1. 'the soul ... can see and perceive'. 'Abdu'l-Baha, adopting the language of Avicennan psychology, states that the soul can know 'through instruments and organs' and 'without instruments and organs'.<sup>13</sup> He calls the latter knowing capacity of the soul 'insight',<sup>14</sup> 'inner perception' (*[dīdih-yi] baṣīrat*, literally: the eye of insight), 'subjective ... knowledge' (*'ilm-i vujūdī*, literally: knowledge of being), or 'intuitive knowledge' (*'ilm-i taḥaqquqī*, literally: knowledge of certainty),<sup>15</sup> and describes its keenness as dependent on one's spiritual progress.
2. '[M]an, in order to know God, must be a partaker of the Divine nature'. 'Abdu'l-Baha states that human 'nature (*ṣūrat*, literally: form) is three-fold: animal, human and divine' (*ṣūrat-i malakūtī, ṣūrat-i insānī va ṣūrat-i ṭabī'ī*, literally: divine, human and animal form).<sup>16</sup> He describes the divine nature of human beings as 'the image or likeness of God' and says that it is characterized by 'justice, sincerity, faithfulness, knowledge, wisdom, illumination, mercy and pity, coupled with intellect, comprehension, the power to grasp the realities of things and the ability to penetrate the truths of existence'.<sup>17</sup> The Persian notes recorded by an

unmentioned listener during the same talk by 'Abdu'l-Baha provide a slightly different list of virtues, that may be provisionally translated as follows: 'justice (*'adl*) and faithfulness (*vaḡā*), sincerity (*ṣidq*) and purity (*ṣafā*), wisdom (*ḡikmat*) and fear of God (*tuq ā*), mercy (*rah̄m*) and generosity (*murū vat*), love (*maḡabbat*) and friendship (*mavaddat*), nobility (*rif'at*) and spiritual knowledge (*ma 'rifat*).<sup>18</sup>

3. "Without holiness no man may see the Lord." Holiness, intended as 'spiritual perfection or purity',<sup>19</sup> is described in the Baha'i writings as a vital prerequisite to ensure nearness to God. Baha'u'llah writes: 'Thy heart is My home; sanctify (*quds*) it for My descent'.<sup>20</sup> And 'Abdu'l-Baha explains that 'nearness to God ... is dependent upon ... personal sanctification (*tanz ih va taqdis*, literally: purification and sanctification)... [and] necessitates sacrifice of self, severance and the giving up of all to Him' (*infāq-i jān va māl va 'izzat va maṣṣab*, literally: giving up oneself, and wealth, and power, and high office).<sup>21</sup>
4. 'The true hierophant of the mysteries of God is love'. 'Abdu'l-Baha explains that love is 'the light that guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God (*ḡaqq*) with man (*khalq*, literally: creation), that assureth the progress of every illumined soul'.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, the assumptions of mysticism, as described by Inge, and those of the Baha'i Faith are the same: human beings have a divine nature whose development through practising the love of God and self-effacement allows their inner vision to become keener and to perceive the presence of God. This perception of the presence of God is usually referred to by mystics and students of mysticism as 'mystical experience'. So important is 'mystical experience' considered that some scholars of mysticism uphold that one cannot define as 'mystic' any individual who had not at least one mystical experience.

### Mystical experience and its characteristics

The world religious literature is rich in descriptions of mystical experience. Based on these descriptions, scholars have listed a number of its characteristics as follows:

1. *A consciousness of the oneness of everything.* The English philosopher Walter Terence Stace (1886–1967) describes this consciousness as arising from the exclusion of 'all the multiplicity of sensuous or conceptual or other empirical content ... so that there remains only a void and empty unity'.<sup>23</sup> In this condition the mystic 'attains to complete communion with the Absolute Order, and submits to the inflow of its supernal vitality',<sup>24</sup> and thus experiences what the German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (1401–64) called '*coincidentia oppositorum*'<sup>25</sup> or 'coincidence of contradictories'.<sup>26</sup>
2. *Timelessness.* The English educationalist Frank C. Happold (1893–1971) explains that, during a mystical experience, the relationships between events 'are not capable of being adequately described in terms of past, present, and future, or earlier than, later than. These experiences have a timeless quality'.<sup>27</sup>
3. *Sense of objectivity or reality.* Happold writes that mystical experiences 'are states of knowledge',<sup>28</sup> a knowledge characterized by a high degree of certitude.

14. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahā during His visit to the United States and Canada in 1912* (comp. Howard MacNutt, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982) 325.
15. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *An Nūr al-Abḡā fi Mufāvadāt-i 'Abdu'l-Bahā. Table Talks collected by Laura Clifford Barney*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1983) 5, 111; English translation: *Some Answered Questions* 6, 157.
16. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Majmū'ih-yi Khaṡābāt-i ḡaḡrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahā* (Langenhain: Baha'i-Verlag, 1984) 641; English translation: *Promulgation* 465.
17. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation* 464, 465.
18. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Majmū'ih* 641; As to *ma'rifat*, cf. 'insight in divine matters or mysteries', (Francis Joseph Steingass, *A Comprehensive Persian-English Dictionary including the Arabic words and phrases to be met with in Persian literature* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) s.v. *ma'arafat*, *ma'arifat*, 1271.
19. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (ed. John A. Simpson and Edmund S. C. Weiner, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989) s.v. 'holiness', 7:307.
20. Baha'u'llah, 'Kalimāt-i Maknūnih 'arabi', in *Alwāḡ-i Mubarakih ḡaḡrat-i Bahā'u'llāḡ*, rpt (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1978) 29; English translation:

- The Hidden Words of Bahā'u'llāh* (trans. Shoghi Effendi with the assistance of some English friends, Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1975) 17. The Arabic root *qadusa*, from which *quds* comes, has the same connotations as the Hebrew *qādōsh*, the Greek *hagios*, the Latin *sanctus* and *sacer*, the German *heilig*, and the English *holy*, whose meanings have been explained by Rudolf Otto.
21. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Majmū'ih* 397; English translation: *Promulgation* 148.
  22. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Muntakhabātī az Makātīb-i Haqrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahā* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979) 25; English translation: *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha* (trans. Marzieh Gail, Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1978) 27. *Haqq* and *khalq* are a binomial of Sufi theology: *haqq* designates the Divinity as distinguished from *khalq*, the creature.
  23. Walter Terence Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1961) 79.
  24. Underhill, *Mysticism* 432–3.
  25. Nicholas of Cusa, 'Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae', in *Nicolai de Cusa Opera Omnia* (ed. Raymond Klibanski, 2 vols, Leipzig/Hamburg: F. Meiner Verlag, 1932) 2:15.
  26. Jasper Hopkins, *Nicholas of Cusa's Debate with John Wenk: A Translation and an Appraisal of De Ignota Litteratura and*
4. *Feelings of blessedness, joy, peace, happiness, etc.*
  5. *A feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred or divine.*
  6. *Ineffability*. Mystical experience resembles a feeling and 'it is not possible to make a state of feeling clear to one who has not experienced it'.<sup>29</sup>
  7. *Paradoxicality*. Mystics always feel an urgent need to share their experience with others. And they try to overcome its ineffability through 'linguistic devices as simile, metaphor and paradox, however inadequate these may be for the task'.<sup>30</sup>
  8. *Transience*. Mystical experience, with its feeling of timelessness, is seldom prolonged. Whenever the timeless moment has vanished, the mystic feels a kind of 'nostalgia and longing for moments that he has perceived ... at times, and that he has perceived as not transient'.<sup>31</sup> And yet, some mystics are wholly immersed in their spiritual condition, so that their mystical experience 'can become so frequent, so much a way of life, that, in the words of St John of the Cross ... "the soul has it in its power to abandon itself, whenever it wills, to this sweet sleep of love"'.<sup>32</sup>
  9. *Passivity*. The mystics perceive themselves as the object of their own experience, as deprived of any will, as being seized by an outward power.
  10. *Unreality of the mundane self*. Usually there is a strict connection between the perception of the self, on the one hand, and sensory perception, awareness of time and the feeling of being willingly active, on the other. In a mystical experience all that disappears and, in the words of the German theologian and religious philosopher Rudolf Otto (1869–1937), the mystic perceives 'the self ... the personal "I", as something not perfectly or essentially real, or even as mere nullity'.<sup>33</sup> The perception of the self expands and brings the individual closer to her inner self, a reality that the German Dominican preacher, theologian and mystic Meister Johannes Eckhart (c.1260–1327) calls '*scintilla animae*' (the spark of the soul).<sup>34</sup>
  11. *A moral content*. Mystical experience leaves in its wake a sense of duty in its subject. As student of esotericism and mystic Arthur Edward Waite (1857–1942) observes: 'those who enter into this state come back into the world, with the yoke of the kingdom upon them in a law of service. Then God shall give them work'.<sup>35</sup> The accomplished mystic may be thus described as 'a pioneer of humanity, a sharply intuitive and painfully practical person: an artist, a discoverer, a religious or social reformer, a national hero, a "great active" among the saints'.<sup>36</sup>
  12. *Side phenomena*. That is, 'special altered states – visions, locutions, raptures and the like – which admittedly have played a large part in mysticism but which many mystics have insisted do not constitute the essence of the encounter with God'.<sup>37</sup> Most scholars agree with the Irish Catholic theologian Dom Cuthbert Butler (1858–1934) – whose essay *Western Mysticism* has been described as 'a masterly exhibition of the religious and psychological normality of the Christian contemplative life, as developed by its noblest representatives'<sup>38</sup> – on the opinion that '[e]ssential mysticism should not be identified with occasional accidental concomitants, as visions, revelations, raptures, or other psycho-physical phenomena', and that 'the title mystical' should not be given 'to curious experiences and manifestations bordering on those of Spiritism; to intimations, second sight, telepathy; or religious "queer stories"'. For all

such phenomena there is an accepted scientific term: they are “psychic” not “mystic”.<sup>39</sup>

A question arises while studying mystical experience. Why is it confined only to a limited number of human beings, and not as common as sensory and rational experiences? What is the difference between the mystic who goes through such an experience and the individuals who never have it? On the one hand, Sudbrack observes that ‘the question whether each human being or only certain “privileged” individuals are called to mysticism is put in the wrong way. Mysticism as a meeting is an inner experience of each living faith in God.’<sup>40</sup> And Underhill maintains that ‘mysticism may be looked upon as the final term, the active expression, of a power latent in the whole race: the power, that is to say, of ... perceiving transcendent reality’, and that ‘[f]ew people pass through life without knowing what it is to be at least touched by this mystical feeling’.<sup>41</sup> On the other hand, Robert K. C. Forman, Associate Professor of Religion, Hunter College of the City University of New York, describes mystical experience as a ‘pure consciousness event ... a wakeful but objectless consciousness’; maintains that ‘[t]he mystical encounter with awareness itself ... represents an innate capacity’ of each human being; quotes large-scale studies done in the 1990s, which have ascertained ‘that nearly *half* – 43 percent of all Americans and 48 percent of all British people – have had one or more mystical experiences’, and points out that ‘[t]hough most keep their tales of these extraordinary experiences largely private, many of this near majority have oriented vital aspects of their lives around them’.<sup>42</sup>

Another controversial issue is whether mystical experience is only spontaneous or may be induced. Some authors think that mystical experience is a gratuitous gift. Among them the French Jesuit theologian Father Augustin Poulain (1836–1919) wrote: ‘Supernatural acts or states are called mystical, which our own efforts and industry are unable to produce, even feebly, even for a moment.’<sup>43</sup> Other authors maintain that human beings can so refine their knowing capacities through a particular personal training as to have a direct experience of the Divine. Usually they also maintain that this training consists in ascetic practices, variously described by divers authors. Still other authors say, like Sudbrack, that mystical experience ‘is both a gift and the fulfilment of one’s freedom; lovers experience their love as both a gift and a free personal action’.<sup>44</sup>

Through their studies of the descriptions of the mystics, scholars have inferred that many factors may contribute to bringing about mystical experience:<sup>45</sup>

1. A personal predisposition, which may also be ignored by the subject.
2. An act of will on the part of the subject, which may express itself as an active search for God before her experience begins.
3. Specific stimuli, whose nature depends on the mystic’s personality, upbringing, and religious, social and cultural background. These stimuli are synthesized by Robert Andrew Gilbert, a historian of the occult revival of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as follows:

aspects of nature (commonly water and heights; trees, flowers and their scent; sunrise and sunset), music; poetry; pictorial art; architecture (especially

Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae, 3rd edn. (Minneapolis, MN: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 1988) 470, at <http://www.cla.umn.edu/jhopkins/Apologia12-2000.pdf> (accessed 20 January 2006).

27. Frank C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology*, 3rd edn. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) 47–8.
28. Happold, *Mysticism* 45.
29. Happold, *Mysticism* 45.
30. Robert Andrew Gilbert, *The Elements of Mysticism* (Shaftesbury [Dorset]: Element Books, 1991) 89.
31. Beaudé, *Mística* 119 [English translation by the author].
32. Happold, *Mysticism* 55. St John of the Cross (1542–91), mystical doctor and founder of the Discalced Carmelites. Cf. St John of the Cross, *A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul and the Bridgroom Christ* (trans. David Lewis, with corrections and an introduction by Benedict Zimmerman, OCD, Prior of St Luke’s, Wincanton, 28 June 1909, stanzas 20–21, verse 21, at [http://www.ccel.org/j/john\\_of\\_the\\_cross/canticle/canticle2.5.rtf](http://www.ccel.org/j/john_of_the_cross/canticle/canticle2.5.rtf) (accessed 20 January 2006).
33. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (trans. John W. Harvey, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959) 21.
34. Meister Eckhart, *Passion for Creation: The Earth-Honoring Spirituality of Meister*

- Eckhart* (ed. Matthew Fox, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, c. 2000) 277.
35. Arthur Edward Waite, *Lamps of Western Mysticism: Essays on the Life of the Soul in God* (London: Kegan Paul, 1923).
36. Underhill, *Mysticism* 414.
37. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1997) xvii–xviii.
38. Underhill, *Mysticism* xi.
39. Dom Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism: The Teaching of Augustine, Gregory and Bernard on Contemplation and the Contemplative Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001), lxii.
40. Sudbrack, *Mistica* 158 [English translation by the author].
41. Underhill, *Mysticism* 73.
42. Robert K. C. Forman, 'Mystical Consciousness, the Innate Capacity, and the Perennial Psychology', in *The Innate Capacity: Mysticism, Psychology and Philosophy* (ed. Robert K. C. Forman, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 7, 3.
43. Alain Poulain, *Les Grâces d'oraison* [The Graces of Interior Prayer] (Paris: Beauchesne, 1922); quoted in Butler *Western Mysticism* xix–xx.
44. Sudbrack, *Mistica* 158 [English translation by the author].
45. Cf. Gilbert, *Elements of Mysticism* 87–8.
- churches); creative work; and sexual love ... natural beauty; sacred places; prayer, meditation and worship; the visual and auditory arts; literature in various forms; and ... personal relationships ... sorrow, despair and stress.<sup>46</sup>
4. Special historical circumstances. Different forms of mysticism have already been referred to above.

### Mystical experience in the Baha'i writings

The descriptions of the spiritual condition conferred upon all those who have successfully met the prerequisites of spiritual search, as set forth in the Baha'i writings, are similar to the descriptions of mystical experiences:

1. *A consciousness of the oneness of everything.* Baha'u'llah writes that the wayfarer in the Valley of Unity 'drinketh from the cup of the Absolute and gazeth on the Manifestations of Oneness'.<sup>47</sup> However, this consciousness of the oneness of everything is not meant in the Baha'i writings as the result of a 'tie of direct intercourse (*rābiṭih va munāsabat va muv āfaqat va mush ābahat*, literally: tie, connection, similarity, semblance)' between 'the one true God' and 'His creation'.<sup>48</sup> It is rather intended as 'self-surrender and perpetual union with God (*fanā' az nafs va baqā bi-Allāh*)', a condition that is realized when 'men ... merge their will wholly in the Will of God, and regard their desires as utter nothingness beside His Purpose', that is, when 'they diligently, and with the utmost joy and eagerness, arise and fulfil' '[w]hatsoever the Creator commandeth His creatures to observe'.<sup>49</sup> And thus the consciousness of the oneness of everything is seemingly described in the Baha'i texts as the knowledge of one's divine nature attained in its expression through daily deeds performed in obedience to the divine laws, an effort that implies on the one hand purification of one's mundane self and on the other knowledge of one's divine self. This is the highest spiritual station a human being may attain on earth.
2. *No perception of time and space.* Baha'u'llah writes that the wayfarer in the Valley of Wonderment 'goeth from astonishment to astonishment, and is lost in awe (*maḥv*: literally: annihilation) at the works (*ṣan'-i jadīd*, literally: new creation) of the Lord of Oneness'.<sup>50</sup>
3. *Sense of reality and certitude.* Baha'u'llah writes in the Kitāb-i qān: 'Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leadeth him to the stations of absolute certitude' (*'ayn al-yaq īn va ḥaqq al-yaq īn va nūr al-yaq īn*, literally: the eye of certitude, and the truth of certitude, and the light of certitude).<sup>51</sup>
4. *Feelings of blessedness, joy, peace, happiness.* Baha'u'llah writes that the traveller in the Valley of Contentment '[f]rom sorrow ... turneth to bliss, from anguish to joy. His grief and mourning yield to delight and rapture'.<sup>52</sup>
5. *Feeling that what is apprehended is holy, sacred or divine.* Baha'u'llah writes in the Kitāb-i lqān that whosoever has entered the 'City of Certitude ... will discern the wonders of His ancient wisdom, and will perceive all the hidden teachings from the rustling leaves of the Tree – which flourisheth in that City. With both his inner and his outer ear he will hear from its dust the hymns of glory and praise ascending unto the Lord of Lords'.<sup>53</sup>

6. *Ineffability*. Baha'u'llah writes, in the Valley of Contentment, 'The tongue faileth in describing these three Valleys [Contentment, Wonderment and True Poverty], and speech falleth short. The pen steppeth not into this region ('*arṣat*, literally: court), the ink leaveth only a blot.'<sup>54</sup>
7. *Paradoxicality*. Baha'u'llah writes of the seeker who has entered the Valley of Wonderment: 'Now he seeth the shape of wealth as poverty itself, and the essence of freedom as sheer impotence. Now is he struck dumb (*maḥv*, literally: annihilation) with the beauty of the All-Glorious; again is he wearied out with his own life.'<sup>55</sup>
8. *Transience and nostalgia for the timeless moment*. Baha'u'llah writes in the Kitāb-i Iqan: 'They that valiantly labour in quest of God's will (*muj āhid īn fī Allāh*, literally: those who fight for God), when once they have renounced all else but Him, will be so attached and wedded to that City that a moment's separation from it would to them be unthinkable.'<sup>56</sup>
9. *Passivity*. Baha'u'llah writes: 'Were any man to ponder in his heart that which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed and to taste of its sweetness, he would, of a certainty, find himself emptied and delivered from his own desires, and utterly subservient to the Will of the Almighty.'<sup>57</sup>
10. *Unreality of the mundane self*. Baha'u'llah writes in the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness: 'when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved, the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils and wrappings. Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend.'<sup>58</sup>
11. *Moral content*. Baha'u'llah writes in the Kitāb-i Aqdas: '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.'<sup>59</sup>
12. *Side phenomena*. As to visions, auditions, locutions, raptures and the like, Shoghi Effendi states that a distinction should be made. On the one hand, there are those visions 'experienced by Divine Prophets and Messengers'.<sup>60</sup> On the other, there are those experienced by ordinary human beings. As to the former, since Baha'is share with other religionists the idea that 'the whole theory of Divine Revelation rests on the infallibility of the Prophet',<sup>61</sup> they are obviously considered 'direct and authoritative revelation from God'.<sup>62</sup> As to the latter, Shoghi Effendi mentions at least three categories:
- a. '[T]rue visions which are true spiritual experiences ... granted to those who are spiritually pure and receptive'.<sup>63</sup> He says that these experiences 'are very rare',<sup>64</sup> come 'to an individual through the grace of God, and not through the exercise of any of the human faculties',<sup>65</sup> and that '[i]t is very difficult to distinguish between true visions which are true spiritual experiences of the soul and imaginations which have no reality in spiritual truths'.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, as precious as such experiences may be considered by the individual who has them, they 'should, under no circumstances, be construed as constituting an infallible source of guidance, even for the person experiencing them'.<sup>67</sup>
46. Gilbert, *Elements of Mysticism* 87. These data are the results of the studies of the English [born in Manchester] novelist, critic and journalist Marghanita Laski (1915–88) and the British scientist Sir Alister Hardy (1896–1985).
47. Baha'u'llah, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* (trans. Marzieh Gail, rev. edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1952 and 1991) 17.
48. Baha'u'llah, *Muntakhabātī* 51; English translation: *Gleanings* 66.
49. Baha'u'llah, 'Lawḥ-i Shaykh Fānī', in *Muntakhabātī* 217; English translation: *Gleanings* 337. 'Fanā' and 'baqā' are two Arabic words by which the Sufis refer to mystical death and mystical union with the Absolute, respectively.
50. Baha'u'llah, 'Haft-i Vādī', in *Āthār-i qalam-i a'lā*, vol. 3 (Baha'i Publishing Trust, Teheran, 129 BE/1972–73) 125; English translation: *Seven Valleys* 32.
51. Baha'u'llah, *Kitāb-i Mustatāb-i qān*, rpt. (Hofheim-Langenhain: Baha'i-Verlag, 1980) 152; English translation: *Kitāb-i qān: The Book of Certitude* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970) 196.
52. Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys* 29.
53. Baha'u'llah, *Kitāb-i qān* 197–8.
54. Baha'u'llah, 'Haft-i Vādī' 122; English

- translation: *Seven Valleys* 30.
55. Baha'u'llah, 'Haft-i Vādī' 124; English translation: *Seven Valleys* 31–2.
  56. Baha'u'llah, *Kitāb-i Mustatāb-i qān* 153; English version: *Kitāb-i qān* 198–9.
  57. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* 343.
  58. Baha'u'llah, *Seven Valleys* 36.
  59. Baha'u'llah, *Kitāb-i Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 1992) 20.
  60. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Mrs Kathryn Frankland, 1 November 1940, in *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
  61. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 11 January 1942, in *Lights of Guidance: A Baha'i Reference File* (comp. Helen Bassett Hornby, rev. edn., New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1996) 477.
  62. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Mrs Kathryn Frankland, 1 November 1940, in *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
  63. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 26 November 1939, in *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
  64. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 25 October 1942, in *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2. This statement may seem inconsistent with the above-mentioned results of the statistics quoted by Forman. The inconsistency may be due to the different
    - b. Experiences 'which have no reality in spiritual truths',<sup>68</sup> and are the product of human imaginations 'however real ... [they] may seem ... to be'.<sup>69</sup> Shoghi Effendi says that there is no way of knowing the 'origin and purpose' of such experiences, and warns the Baha'is not to 'place much importance on' them.<sup>70</sup>
    - c. '[P]sychic phenomena',<sup>71</sup> which 'pertain mostly to the domain of conjectures'<sup>72</sup> and are often 'an indication of a deep psychological disturbance'.<sup>73</sup> The Baha'i teachings warn the Baha'is to avoid 'all psychic dabbling and exercise of psychic faculties',<sup>74</sup> and Shoghi Effendi explains this Baha'i position as follows: 'If Baha'u'llah had attached the slightest importance to occult experiences, to the seeing of auras, to the hearing of mystic voices ... He, Himself, would have mentioned all of these things in His Teachings. The fact that He passed over them in silence shows that to Him, they had either no importance or no reality, and were consequently not worthy to take up His time as the Divine Educator of the human race.'<sup>75</sup>

### Mystical experience as explained in the Baha'i teachings

The Baha'i teachings do not deny the possibility and the relative value of mystical experience as a personal guidance, for people who meet the 'indispensable condition' of '[p]urity of heart'.<sup>76</sup> Shoghi Effendi admits that '[i]n many cases dreams have been the means of bringing people to the truth';<sup>77</sup> that daily prayer, meditation and concentration, as well as an earnest and sustained effort to do God's Will, may help us 'to feel the direct spiritual guidance of God',<sup>78</sup> and 'discover, though not always and fully, God's Will intuitively',<sup>79</sup> and thus 'not to make so many mistakes and to receive more directly the Guidance God seeks to give us';<sup>80</sup> that our power of insight may become keener if we 'strive to become pure in heart and "free from all save God"',<sup>81</sup> and that as we meditate, 'God can inspire into our minds things that we had no previous knowledge of, if He desires to do so'.<sup>82</sup> He also suggests that we test our insights, on the one hand, 'by comparing them with the revealed Word and seeing whether they are in harmony therewith',<sup>83</sup> and, on the other, by putting them into practice: 'if the way opens, when we have sought guidance', he says, 'then we may presume God is helping us'.<sup>84</sup> However, he concludes that 'implicit faith in our intuitive powers is unwise',<sup>85</sup> and that '[u]nder no circumstances ... can a person be absolutely certain that he is recognizing God's Will, through the exercise of his intuition. It often happens that the latter results in completely misrepresenting the truth, and thus becomes a source of error rather than of guidance'.<sup>86</sup> He explains that the Manifestations of God 'have the channels of the Cause through which to guide us. They do not need to go outside these and send individual revelations.' Thus, on the one hand, he directs the Baha'is to seek guidance from the writings and 'the channels of the Cause' (i.e. the Baha'i elected and appointed institutions) through study, meditation and consultation,<sup>87</sup> and on the other, he assures the Baha'is that '[i]f we are going to have some deeply spiritual experience we can rest assured God will vouchsafe it to us without our having to look for it',<sup>88</sup> and warns them not 'to go groping about in the darkness of ... [one's] imagination after the true thing',<sup>89</sup> making clear that '[w]hen a person endeavours to develop

faculties so that they might enjoy visions, dreams, etc., actually what they are doing is weakening certain of their spiritual capacities; and thus under such circumstances, dreams and visions have no reality, and ultimately lead to the destruction of the character of the person'.<sup>90</sup>

Therefore, in the light of the Baha'i teachings the purpose of mystic search, a search which is enjoined upon all human beings as a spiritual obligation, is not the development of 'faculties so that ... [one] might enjoy visions, dreams, etc.',<sup>91</sup> but the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers, as vital instruments in one's service to the cause of the well-being of humankind. Holiness, or spiritual perfection, as a perfect instrument for the service of humankind is exemplified by 'Abdu'l-Baha, who has been bequeathed by Baha'u'llah to his followers as 'the perfect Exemplar of His Faith ... endowed with super-human knowledge',<sup>92</sup> 'the embodiment of every Baha'i ideal, the incarnation of every Baha'i virtue',<sup>93</sup> in other words, as the perfect mystic.

### Negative connotations associated with mysticism

If, according to the Baha'i teachings, mysticism is such an important part of religion – its essence, we could say – why were so many negative connotations associated with it? Why did such a conflict arise between the mystics and their religious institutions? And, moreover, what are considered to be the dangers of mysticism in the Baha'i community, and what instructions are given to avoid the pitfalls into which other religions have stumbled while treading the mystic path? All these questions deserve serious attention and reflection.

Mysticism is so closely knit to religion that the destinies of the former are likely to be strictly related to the destinies of the latter. In the 19th and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries the name of religion has been associated with many negative connotations, and many westerners have come to consider it as an obstacle in the path of progress. Mysticism also has been associated with many negative connotations. It was castigated by both detractors and upholders of religion. By the former, it was accused of superstition and charlatanism because of their materialistic worldview, and by the latter, because they were usually more attached to the shell of religion than to its kernel. In times of religious decline, mystics, endowed – as they often are – with attributes of inner perfection, may be more aware of the inner meanings of religion than are their own declining religious institutions. However, because they are human, they also are liable to make mistakes in their interpretations of reality.

Last but not least, both detractors and upholders of religion have been over-focused 'on the highly ambiguous notion of mystical experience', resulting not only in a wrong conception of mysticism itself, but also in a 'neglect of mystical hermeneutics'.<sup>94</sup>

### Reasons for suspicion of mysticism in the Baha'i community

Some Baha'is could be suspicious about mysticism on the grounds of three sets of factors: the influence of the humanistic and materialistic attitudes of western culture; some misunderstandings of the true nature of mysticism; and misinterpretations of the words of the Baha'i authoritative texts.

meaning given to the term 'mystical experience'. In the author's opinion, Shoghi Effendi here refers to the accomplished mystics, and not to those people who, in the words of Underhill, may be defined as 'contemplatives in the earlier and educative stages of the Mystic Way' (Underhill, *Mysticism* 414).

65. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 6 May 1952, quoted in *Bahā'ī Institutions: A Compilation* (New Delhi: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1973) 114.
66. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 26 November 1939, *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
67. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Mrs Kathryn Frankland, 1 November 1940, in *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
68. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 26 November 1939, in *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
69. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 25 October 1942, in *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
70. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 9 April 1948, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 113.
71. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 20 November 1937, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 108.

72. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of Australia and New Zealand, 30 March 1938, in *Letters to Australia and New Zealand 1923–1957*, rpt. (Sydney: The National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Australia, 1971) 26.
73. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 20 November 1937, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 108.
74. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 24 June 1941, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 110. Cf. John E. Esslemont, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. edn. (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980) 193.
75. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 April 1954, quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 539.
76. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 14 January 1938, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 108.
77. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 16 May 1925, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 107.
78. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 14 January 1938, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 108.
79. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 29 October 1938, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 109.
80. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an

### ***The influence of the humanistic and materialistic attitudes of western civilization***

The Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing Baha'i institution, has stated that 'it does not beseem a Baha'i to write ... about his Faith as if he looked upon it from the norm of humanism or materialism'.<sup>95</sup> The Supreme Body also explained that '[t]his approach, although understandable, is quite impossible for a Baha'i, for it ignores the fact that our worldview includes the spiritual dimension as an indispensable component for consistency and coherence'.<sup>96</sup> However, if Baha'is are among those who, somehow influenced by contemporary western culture, consciously or unconsciously look upon certain aspects of daily life 'from the norm of humanism or materialism', they may encounter two different and opposing pitfalls.

On the one hand, they may undervalue such mystical aspects of life as prayer, devotion, meditation, and lay 'too much emphasis ... on the social and economic aspects of the Teachings'.<sup>97</sup> They may underrate the importance of the mystical relation between their soul and the Manifestation of God. They may dissociate 'the moral aspect' of the Baha'i teachings – which, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, 'cannot be over-emphasized'<sup>98</sup> – from their mystical aspect. And therefore they may assume that human beings may become spiritual people by the mere power of their being rational and logical (or 'scientific', as is sometimes said) without consciously and willingly drawing on the powers of the spirit of faith and the Holy Spirit. The difference between this approach and that of the best among western atheists, who strive after moral perfection without drawing on the spiritual powers of religion that they consider 'as irrelevant to the major concerns of the modern world',<sup>99</sup> does not seem to be very great.

On the other hand, they may encounter the pitfall of overestimating material miracles, dreams, visions, communications with departed relatives or friends, etc. In other words, they may fall into some of those forms of superstition that seem to have had a revival at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with 'the emergence of an increasing number of obscure cults, of strange and new worships, of ineffective philosophies'.<sup>100</sup> Shoghi Effendi has given clear directives on these issues. He reminded the Baha'is that 'modern psychology has taught that the capacity of the human mind for believing what it imagines, is almost infinite'.<sup>101</sup> And thus he urged them not to 'believe in the divine origin of any such things which have not been mentioned in our own Sacred Scriptures by either the Bab, Baha'u'llah or the Master'.<sup>102</sup> He specifically warned them against such 'vain imaginings' as: 'psychic practices and phenomena',<sup>103</sup> alleged 'communications with spirits',<sup>104</sup> "'table-writing'",<sup>105</sup> the illusion 'of being directed by him [Shoghi Effendi] in the inner plane',<sup>106</sup> or through 'visions, dreams, etc.',<sup>107</sup> certain forms of 'radiations of thoughts or healing',<sup>108</sup> 'numerology and astrology',<sup>109</sup> 'the Fourth Dimension',<sup>110</sup> 'the *categorical* affirmations of Rudolphe Steiner' and other 'scholars',<sup>111</sup> 'the pyramid of Cheops' and their alleged prophecies,<sup>112</sup> 'a concealed group of masters in the Himalayas or anywhere else', as well as 'mystical stories of beings that are "behind the scenes" so to speak'.<sup>113</sup> Shoghi Effendi referred to all these 'metaphysical hair-splittings, and other abstract things carried to the extreme', as the 'fruitless sciences' mentioned by Baha'u'llah.<sup>114</sup>

Last but not least, Baha'is may come to overestimate the experiential aspects of mysticism and thus yield to a quite dangerous illusion of the human ego, that is, self-centredness and 'spiritual pride, the greatest "sin" in religious life'.<sup>115</sup> They would thus fall within that category of people who are 'more interested in mystical things, and in mystery itself, than in this present world in which we live, and how to solve its problems', people who only 'enjoy abstractions and complications'.<sup>116</sup> They may thus run the risk of being dangerous to themselves and to others.<sup>117</sup>

### **Misunderstandings of the true nature of mysticism**

Baha'is may misinterpret mysticism as a sort of independent esoteric religious movement, deprived of a central figure to whom all people may turn, and founded upon the doctrines formulated by various mystics through individual allegedly divine revelations. They may misconstrue it as a path, open only to particularly gifted individuals, unconcerned with society and its problems and aiming at the achievement of personal, deeper and deeper mystical experiences to the extent of a union of the mystic's soul with the Absolute. They may finally assume that it implies the acceptance of such theories as reincarnation, pre-existence of the human soul, etc. This conception of mysticism undoubtedly brings together many ideas repeatedly expressed by many self-styled mystics, but does not grasp its essence. If Baha'is view mysticism from this perspective, they are like those atheists who condemn religion simply because of the different unreasonable dogmas and theories suggested by religionists. Mysticism is not a single movement, founded by someone, based on certain theories, and growing organically through the centuries. Mysticism is an inner attitude, whose outer expressions through the ages have been influenced by historical circumstance, as well as by the traits of the individuals who wrote of it and taught it. And this inner attitude of communion with the Divine is the core of all religions.

### **Misinterpretations of the words of 'Abdu'l-Baha and of Shoghi Effendi**

A Baha'i may misunderstand the warnings of both 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi against spiritualism, psychic forces and metaphysical hair-splitting as referring to mysticism itself. In order to better understand the traits of the individuals who are described as mystics in the Baha'i writings, it is useful to refer to 'Abdu'l-Baha's *Memorials of the Faithful*. Marzieh Gail (1908–1993), its translator from Persian into English, writes in her proem that this book 'is more than the brief annals of early Baha'i disciples; it is, somehow, a book of prototypes; and it is a kind of testament of values endorsed and willed to us by the Baha'i Exemplar'.<sup>118</sup> 'Abdu'l-Baha's descriptions do not point out the charismatic or miraculous powers of his personages, as does most past eastern and western hagiographic literature, but rather their faithfulness in their application of divine law to the actions of daily life. A high moral standard makes of each one of them an example of a life to be recorded for posterity.

Among them we also find some individuals who tread the traditional mystical path, with its emphasis on the introspective and devotional aspects of spiritual life, and whom 'Abdu'l-Baha defines as belonging to 'the

individual believer, 17 October 1944, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 112.

81. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 16 May 1925, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 107.
82. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 25 January 1943, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 111.
83. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 16 May 1925, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 107.
84. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 25 January 1943, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 111.
85. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 29 October 1938, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 109.
86. *ibid.*
87. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 December 1947, *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
88. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 25 October 1942, *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
89. *ibid.*
90. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 6 May 1952, quoted in *Baha'i Institutions* 114.
91. *ibid.*
92. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1957) 242.
93. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of*

*Bahā'u'llāh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1955) 134.

94. McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* xiv.
95. Letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 4 October 1994, *The Compilation of Compilations*. Prepared by the Universal House of Justice (3 vols., Ingleside, NSW: Baha'i Publications Australia, 1991–2000) 3:261. The fundamental ideas of materialism, which emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, are described in *Century of Light*, an essay on the 20<sup>th</sup> century commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, as follows: 'Reality – including human reality and the process by which it evolves – is essentially material in nature. The goal of human life is, or ought to be, the satisfaction of material needs and wants. Society exists to facilitate this quest, and the collective concern of humankind should be an ongoing refinement of the system, aimed at rendering it ever more efficient in carrying out its assigned task' (*Century of Light* [Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 2001] 89). The Baha'i Faith does not agree with any of these statements. As to humanism, *Webster's English Dictionary* defines it 'a philosophy that rejects supernaturalism, regards man as a natural object, and asserts the essential dignity and worth of

mystic element ('*urafā*').<sup>119</sup> They are nine: Nabī-i Akbar, Mullā 'Alī -Akbar, Muḥammad 'Alī from Isfahan, Darvīsh Şidq-'Alī, Hājī Muḥammad Khān, Mishkīn Qalam, Hājī Āqī-yi Tabrīzī, Mīrzā Muşţafā and Shams-i Ḍuḥā.<sup>120</sup> 'Abdu'l-Baha does not praise them for their mystical experiences, but for having escaped the snares of a corrupted form of mysticism and for having become lovers of the Truth as manifested by Baha'u'llah and the champions of his Covenant. While speaking of Darvīsh Şidq-'Alī he says that Baha'u'llah wrote that the word *darvīsh*, often used in Persian to mean 'mystic', 'designates those who are completely severed from all but God, who cleave to His laws, are firm in His Faith, loyal to His Covenant, and constant in worship'.<sup>121</sup>

We may well conclude that the Baha'i teachings condemn mysticism in what they regard as its corrupted aspects, as they do in the case of earlier religions, yet appreciate it in its essence. As Shoghi Effendi wrote through his secretary: 'the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites Man with God'.<sup>122</sup>

### A Baha'i definition of mysticism

We can now attempt to formulate a Baha'i definition of mysticism. Shoghi Effendi stated:

We liken God to the Sun, which gives us all our life. So the Spirit of God reaches us through the Souls of the Manifestations. We must learn to commune with Their Souls, and this is what the Martyrs seemed to have done, and what brought them such ecstasy of joy that life became nothing. This is the true mysticism, and the secret, inner meaning of life which humanity has, at present, drifted so far from.<sup>123</sup>

'True mysticism' seems here described as a state of communion between a believer and the soul of the Manifestation of God that conveys the Spirit of God unto her, bringing 'such ecstasy of joy that life becomes nothing'. This communion is so important as to be identified with 'the secret, inner meaning of life' and with 'the core of religious faith'.<sup>124</sup> And thus, in the light of the Baha'i teachings, mysticism may also be defined as spirituality or 'spiritual progress',<sup>125</sup> intended as 'the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers',<sup>126</sup> that is, the capacity 'to perceive the Divine reality of things (*ḥaqāyiq-i āshyā*, literally: the essential realities of all things) ... by the power of the Holy Spirit' (*az nafathāt-i rūḥ al-quds*, literally: by the issuing forth of the Holy Spirit).<sup>127</sup> Shoghi Effendi explains that 'spirituality ... is the essence of Man',<sup>128</sup> that it implies for 'the ego ... [to] be ever-increasingly subordinated to the enlightened soul of man',<sup>129</sup> and that 'the foundation of true spirituality is steadfastness in the Covenant'.<sup>130</sup>

These statements explain why Shoghi Effendi said that mysticism lies at the core of the Baha'i Faith, as of any other religion. All Baha'is are called to mysticism, because Baha'u'llah urges them to strive with every nerve so that they may commune with his soul, and thus receive the blessings of the Spirit of God, in the form of 'spiritual virtues and powers', and become effective instruments for the implementation of his plan for humankind.

## The Baha'i mystic path

Baha'u'llah, with his announcement of 'the coming of age of the entire human race',<sup>131</sup> and his promise that God will raise a new 'race of men (*khalq*, literally: creatures) the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God, the All-Powerful, the Self-Subsisting', and that 'He shall purify them from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires, shall lift them up to the heights of holiness, and shall cause them to manifest the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth',<sup>132</sup> is asserting that all human beings are now ready to tread the mystic path, struggling to achieve the purpose of human life: to know and to love God. Baha'u'llah states that he has given to human beings whatever they need to follow this path and accomplish this purpose.

1. First of all, he has revealed doctrinal explanations, the main features of which are expounded in his most important doctrinal work, the *Kitab-i Iqan*. Through its study, on the one hand people can learn a method that will enable them to understand the meaning of the words of the Manifestations of God, both of the present and of the past, even when they speak the difficult language 'of the truth-seeker and the mystic' (*lisān-i ḥ aq īqat vaṭ rīqat*, literally: the language of the Truth and of the Way).<sup>133</sup> On the other hand, they can achieve a deeper understanding of God, His Manifestations, the meaning of revelation, human nature, and the path human beings should tread in order to acquire a deeper knowledge of reality, both in themselves and in the world of creation.
2. Baha'u'llah has conveyed, throughout his writings, 'a coherent poetic myth', described by William P. Collins as a 'universe, with constantly varying topography that extends into the past and future of eternity, out into the macrocosm of the physical universe and into the microcosm of that most spiritual of all universes – our own hearts and minds'.<sup>134</sup> Collins explains the importance of this language for human beings 'to have some grasp of the reality of the ultimate mysteries of the universe'.<sup>135</sup> As the soul is exposed to this language, and enters into its universe, which is a metaphorical description of the inner worlds of spirit, it goes through 'a crisis of understanding', it leaps 'to new knowledge and to that fruit of mature experience which is the acknowledgement of one's powerlessness, ignorance, and poverty. With that acknowledgement, the power, knowledge, and riches of the Reality behind the universe's mask becomes instantly and irrevocably ours'.<sup>136</sup> And this 'acknowledgement of one's powerlessness' and comprehension of 'the Reality behind the universe's mask' is certainly an important stage in the mystical path to be trodden by all human beings in their endeavour to achieve the purpose of their lives.
3. Baha'u'llah has provided ethical guidance, the essence of which is expounded in his most important ethical book, the *Hidden Words*, through whose study and practice people can learn how they must behave while living on earth.
4. He has revealed explanations on true mysticism, in works such as the *Seven Valleys*, his greatest mystical composition, the *Four Valleys*, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, etc. through whose study people can better understand

man and his capacity to achieve self-realization through the use of reason and scientific method' (*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 3rd edn. [Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1986] s.v. 'humanism', 1100). Although the Baha'i Faith is sometimes presented as 'a growing humanist influence on our world' (see for example the Christian Internet site 'Contender Ministries' at <http://www.contenderministries.org/index.php>, accessed 20 January 2006), and indeed shares some of the ideas of humanism, as, for, example the appreciation of freedom of inquiry, expression and action, the aversion for bigotry, hatred, discrimination, intolerance, however, it dissents with those humanists who reject the concept of a personal God, deny the possibility of divine revelation to humankind, regard humans as supreme, and thus refuse the authority of the Messengers of God and the divine origin of human values.

96. Letter of behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 4 October 1994, *Compilation* 3:261.
97. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 6 September 1946, *Compilation* 2:16.
98. *ibid.*
99. The Universal House of Justice, 'The Promise of World

- Peace, October 1985', *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 1963–1986* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1996) 685.
100. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahā'u'llāh* 184.
101. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 April 1954, *Baha'i Institutions* 119.
102. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 11 May 1954, *The Light of Divine Guidance* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Baha'i Verlag, 1985) 2:112. The Bab, Siyyid 'Ali Muhammad (1819–1852), is the founder of the Babi religion and the forerunner of Baha'u'llah. The Master is one of the titles denoting 'Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'u'llah's successor.
103. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 30 March 1938, *Baha'i Institutions* 108.
104. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 25 October 1942, *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 2.
105. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 24 June 1941, *Baha'i Institutions* 110.
106. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 5 May 1947, *Baha'i Institutions* 112.
107. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 6 May 1952, *Baha'i News* 152 (April 1942) 4.
- their mystic path, its nature, its requirements and the inner changes they will experience while advancing along that path.
5. Baha'u'llah has written a book of laws, the Kitab-i Aqdas, his 'Most Holy Book', through whose implementation people can spiritualize society itself.
  6. He has established an unassailable Covenant so that people may be sure that, if they will faithfully abide by the Covenant, they will never remain without his living guidance on earth and thus they will never follow wrong paths.
  7. Lastly, but not least, he has clearly explained the prerequisites of the mystical journey:
- In all these journeys the traveller must stray not the breadth of a hair from the 'Law' (*sharī'at*), for this is indeed the secret of the 'Path' (*ṭarīqat*) and the fruit of the Tree of 'Truth' (*ḥaqīqat*); and in all these stages he must cling to the robe of obedience to the commandments, and hold fast to the cord of shunning all forbidden things, that he may be nourished from the cup of the Law and informed of the mysteries of Truth.<sup>137</sup>
- The Universal House of Justice has summarized the prerequisites of the Baha'i mystical path, described as 'the path towards the attainment of true spirituality that has been laid down by the Manifestation of God for this age', that is Baha'u'llah, as follows:
- Baha'u'llah has stated quite clearly in His Writings the essential requisites for our spiritual growth, and these are stressed again and again by 'Abdu'l-Baha in His talks and Tablets. One can summarize them briefly in this way:
1. The recital each day of one of the Obligatory Prayers with pure-hearted devotion.
  2. The regular reading of the Sacred Scriptures, specifically at least each morning and evening, with reverence, attention and thought.
  3. Prayerful meditation on the teachings, so that we may understand them more deeply, fulfil them more faithfully, and convey them more accurately to others.
  4. Striving every day to bring our behaviour more into accordance with the high standards that are set forth in their teachings.
  5. Teaching the Cause of God.
  6. Selfless service in the work of the Cause and in the carrying on of our trade or profession.<sup>138</sup>

### Preliminary conclusions

At this point, having read the above quotations from the Baha'i writings, perhaps we can try to provide some answers to some of the questions posed above. We asked: 'If, according to the Baha'i teachings, mysticism is such an important part of religion, why are so many negative connotations associated with it? Why did such a conflict arise between the mystics and their religious institutions?' Some answers may be found in the history of religions as explained in the Baha'i scriptures. At the beginning of each religious cycle the presence of the Holy is so intense within the rising

community that most of its members perceive its power, and thus almost all of them are mystics. 'Abdu'l-Baha explains that

the day of the appearance of the Holy Manifestations is the spiritual spring-time; it is the divine splendour; it is the heavenly bounty, the breeze of life, the rising of the Sun of Reality. Spirits are quickened; hearts are refreshed and invigorated; souls become good; existence is set in motion; human realities are gladdened, and grow and develop in good qualities and perfections. General progress is achieved and revival takes place, for it is the day of resurrection, the time of excitement and ferment, and the season of bliss, of joy and of intense rapture.<sup>139</sup>

But in past religious cycles, at the time of the death of the Manifestation of God no Covenant had been clearly established, and thus the issues of the right to interpret the scriptures and of the guidance of the community remained problematic. This fact caused an early and progressive deviation from the purity of the primal teachings and very soon created the conditions for the rising of the mystical forms typical of periods of spiritual decline in the historical development of religions. In such circumstances the mystics sought for direct guidance from God, beyond any encumbering institutional mediation. They were also inclined to work in secrecy, lest their religious institutions might interfere with their activities and even persecute them. Those are the days of oppression, mentioned by Baha'u'llah: 'What "oppression" is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God (*ma'rifat*, literally: insight in divine matters or mysteries), should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?'<sup>140</sup> However, sincere and perceptive as the mystics may have been, they have also been limited by their own humanity, and thus liable to adopt mistaken behaviours and thoughts. And thus we find among the mystics both peaks of spirituality and understandable human flaws.

We also asked: 'What are described as the dangers of mysticism in the Baha'i community? And what instructions are given to avoid the pitfalls into which other religions have stumbled while treading the mystic path?' An answer may be found in the characteristics of the new age, and in particular two of them, as they are described in the Baha'i writings. On the one hand, Baha'u'llah has announced the coming of age of the entire human race, that is to say, the human race is ready for a spiritual maturity that will be manifested through the realization of the oneness of humankind on earth. This coming of age implies that each human being has today the capacity to recognize the 'mystic and wondrous Bride, hidden ere this beneath the veiling of utterance'.<sup>141</sup> It is seemingly the end of the esoteric stage of the mystic way. The hidden truth is today accessible to each human being, because Baha'u'llah has revealed the key for the interpretation of mystic scriptures and because his social principle of universal education is being and will be increasingly applied. He joyously announces that 'whereas in days past every lover besought and searched after his Beloved, it is the Beloved Himself Who now is calling His lovers and is inviting them to attain His presence'.<sup>142</sup> On the other hand, Baha'u'llah has established his Covenant, has denied any authority to any interpretations of Baha'i scripture besides those given by the authorized interpreters, has instituted

108. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 8 June 1948, *Compilation* 2:242.
109. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 26 December 1928, *Baha'i Institutions* 124.
110. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 19 July 1953 *Lights of Guidance* 514.
111. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 April 1954, *Baha'i Institutions* 116 [emphasis added]. Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925), founder of Anthroposophy and originator of Waldorf Education. The focus of these words seems on the locution 'categorical affirmations', rather than on Rudolf Steiner and other scholars. And thus it seems a recommendation not to consider any human source as an infallible authority. The only infallible authority is the Word of God, as expounded in scripture and interpreted by its authorized interpreters.
112. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 10 July 1939, *Baha'i Institutions* 125.
113. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 11 May 1954, *Light of Divine Guidance* 2:112, 113.
114. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 30 July 1956, *Baha'i Institutions* 126. See, for example: 'Knowledge is as wings to man's life,

and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words' (Baha'u'llah, 'Tajalliyāt', in *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh* 51–2).

115. Alessandro Bausani, *Saggi sulla Fede Bahā'ī* [Essays on the Baha'i Faith] (Rome: Casa Editrice Baha'i, 1991) 392.
116. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 22 April 1954, *Baha'i Institutions* 118.
117. Shoghi Effendi stated in 1928 that '[the Baha'i] Cause everywhere has suffered from spiritualists with psychic pretended powers' (Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 10 July 1928, *Lights of Guidance* 519).
118. Marzieh Gail, 'Proem', in 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Memorials of the Faithful* (trans. Marzieh Gail, Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1971) xi.
119. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Tadhkirat al-Vafā' fī Tarjumat Hayāt Qudamā'al-Aḥibbā'* (Maṭbaah al-'Abbāsīyah, Haifa, 1343 AH [1924 AD]) 63; English translation: *Memorials* 36. 'Urafa is the plural of 'arīf, 'the highest grade to which a mystic can attain' (Steingass, *Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary*, s.v. 'arīf, 829).

a governing body which he has declared to be infallible and authorized to 'deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book',<sup>143</sup> that will remain in this world until at least the end of the Baha'i Dispensation. These three strictly interconnected factors assure the protection of his Faith in its development. This, he has declared, is the 'Day which shall never be followed by night',<sup>144</sup> the 'Springtime which autumn will never overtake'.<sup>145</sup> As to the individual Baha'is, it is asserted that they will be protected if, while treading their personal mystical paths, they will remain faithful to the Covenant, if they will always remember that in this Dispensation infallible guidance comes only from Baha'u'llah, 'Abdu'l-Baha, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, who were invested by Baha'u'llah with the gift of infallibility. If the Baha'is will faithfully follow this mystical path, they will actively contribute to preventing that their Faith may 'degenerate into a mere organization, and become a dead thing'.<sup>146</sup> If they will remain faithful to their scriptures, they will also escape the danger of becoming lost behind vain imaginings and metaphysical hair-splitting. But if they do not follow the mystical path, because their scriptures emphasize the importance of the spiritual maturity of the Baha'is in view of the realization of the oneness of humankind, they 'will be held responsible before God, that the race will remain longer in its state of waywardness, that wars would not be so soon averted, that human suffering will last longer'.<sup>147</sup>

The Baha'i mystical path, which may be considered as the core of the Baha'i Faith, is clearly outlined in the Baha'i scriptures in its animating spirit, in its regulating discipline, in the goals at which it aims. The Baha'is need only faithfully tread it and show 'what [their] endeavours in the path of detachment will reveal'.<sup>148</sup>

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### Side notes (continued)

120. Nabī-i Akbar excelled in 'the teachings of the mystics ('*urafā*) and of the Shaykhī School'; Mullā 'Alī-Akbar 'frequented the gatherings of philosophers, mystics ('*urafā*), and Shaykhs, thoughtfully traversing those areas of knowledge ('*ilm*, an Arabic word sometimes translated as science), intuitive wisdom ('*irfān*, among the Sufis this word denotes esoteric knowledge), and illumination' (*ishrāq*, in the Muslim world this word denotes the oriental theosophy or philosophy of Suhrawardi [1155–91]); Muḥammad 'Alī from Isfahan 'was one of the mystics ('*urafā*'); Darvīsh Šidq-'Alī 'belonged to the mystic element ('*urafā*'); Ḥājī Muḥammad Khān 'became a mystic ('*urafā*') when he was very young; Mishkīn-Qalam 'was among the most noted of mystics ('*urafā*') ... [and] a spiritual wayfarer' (*sālik*, an Arabic word denoting among the Sufis the initiated on the mystical path); Ḥājī qā-yi Tabrīzī was 'a spiritual man' and 'had sensed the mystic knowledge ('*irfān*'); Mīrzā Muṣṭafā 'was concerned with the anemones of mystic meanings'; and Shams-i Duḥā was 'strongly attracted to the mystical teachings ('*irfān*) of ... Siyyid Kāzīm-i Rashtī ... [and] became thoroughly informed on subjects relating to Divinity, on the Scriptures and on their inner meanings' ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Tadhkirat al-Vafā* 6, 19, 43, 63, 142, 152, 218, 227, 268–9; English translation: *Memorials* 1, 9, 23, 36, 91, 98, 142, 148, 176).
121. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Memorials* 38.
122. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 8 December 1935, *Baha'i News* 102 (August 1936) 3.
123. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to Manchester Spiritual Assembly, 28 July 1950, *Unfolding Destiny* 406–7.
124. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 8 December 1935, *Baha'i News* 102 (August 1936) 2.
125. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation* 142. The Persian text of this talk may be found in 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Majmū'ih* 75.
126. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 8 December 1935, *Baha'i News* 102 (August 1936) 3.
127. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Majmū'ih* 132; English translation: *Paris Talks* 85.
128. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 25 April 1945, *Compilation* 2:14.
129. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 14 December 1941, in *Compilation* 2:11.
130. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 31 March 1949, in *Light of Divine Guidance* 2:83.
131. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahā'u'llāh* 163.
132. Baha'u'llah, *Lawḥ-i Haykal*, in *Āthār-i qalam-i a'lā*, 3rd edn (Dundas, Ontario: Institute for Bahā'ī Studies in Persian, 1996) 1:3; English translation in Baha'u'llah, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 2002) 6.
133. Baha'u'llah, *Lawḥ-i Mubārak-i Khaṭāb bih Shaykh Muḥammad Taqī-yi Isfahānī ma'rūf bih Najafī* (Canada, 2001) 11; English translation: *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2nd edn., Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1953) 15.
134. William P. Collins, 'Sacred Mythology and the Baha'i Faith', *The Journal of Baha'i Studies*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1989–90) 11.
135. Collins, 'Sacred Mythology', 3.
136. Collins, 'Sacred Mythology', 12–13.
137. Baha'u'llah, 'Haft-i Vādī' 133; English translation: *Seven Valleys* 39–40. *Sharī'at*, *ṭarīqat* and *ḥaqīqat* are the three stages of the Sufi mystical path. Baha'u'llah seemingly describes obedience to the religious law as the essence of mysticism.
138. Letter on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, 1 September 1983, *Lights of Guidance* 542, 541.
139. 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions* 74. In one of his American talks he describes this time as a time when 'the image and likeness of God become visible in man' ('Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation* 95).

140. Baha'u'llah, *Kitāb-i Mustatāb-i qān* 24–5; English version: *Kitāb-i qān* 31. Cf. Steingass, *Comprehensive Persian–English Dictionary*, s.v. ma'arafat, ma'arifat, 1271.
141. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* 51.
142. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings* 320.
143. 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahā* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1971) 20.
144. Baha'u'llah, *Summons* 34.
145. Baha'u'llah, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 99.
146. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 8 December 1935, *Baha'i News* 102 (August 1936) 3.
147. Letter on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, 20 February 1932, *Compilation* 2:4–5.
148. Baha'u'llah, *Hidden Words* 52.