

**Comparison and Transposition of Metaphors
in Bahâ'î and Syriac Christian Conceptual Systems**

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ABSTRACT

This study invites formal comparison of doctrinal metaphors found in the two most widely-diffused religions of the world: Christianity and the Bahá'î Faith.¹ The paper is an exercise in comparison and not an attempt at dialogue, as modern forms of Christianity are purposely excluded from purview. The most metaphorically-rich form of Christianity for comparative purposes was found to be fourth-century Syriac Christianity. This determination was of a practical nature with the interests of data selection in mind, and did not constitute a definitive position on the literary claim made on that data. Saint Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373) was arguably the greatest poet of the patristic era, living in what could be considered the most formative period of Christian history beyond the witness of the New Testament itself.

The use of figurative language across the metaphoric-symbolic continuum will be considered in the Bahá'î and Syriac Christian perspectives. These motifs will be organized in relation to the structurally-important concepts they undergird. Thus, metaphors will be paired with doctrinal concepts. Some of these metaphors will be considered to be functionally equivalent if they are found to “work” in each other’s system. Considerable space will be devoted to a discussion of the problems and prospects of the comparative enterprise itself as prolegomenal to that exercise. The significance of this study is to be assessed on the merits of its theoretical contribution to the phenomenology of religion. The methodological rehabilitation and refinement of what used to be commonly referred to as “comparative religion” is of particular interest, for it is as methodologically challenging as it is unfashionable and represents, at the same time, an attempt to come to terms with some of the “larger issues” *always* raised in the course of teaching world religions. This study closes with fifteen theses prolegomenal to future comparative study of religion.

Rethinking Comparison

The scientific study of religion is said to have two levels of research: historical and comparative.² “Comparison,” according to Jeppe Jensen, “is the basis of all communicable knowledge.”³ For specialists in religious studies, comparison is the basis for generalizable principles on the nature of religion. Sadly, the comparison of religions has lost much of its former respectability. As Jonathan Z. Smith observes, “comparison has come to be, for many in the field, the sign of unscientific procedure.”⁴ The grander the comparative endeavor, the more susceptible it is to criticism. A good example of this kind of vulnerability is given by Talmon, who has discussed the kinds of objections to comparativism raised by specialists in biblical studies and the kinds of distortions that may result when data is abstracted out of context.⁵ It is, frankly, safer to be a specialist.

The enterprise of comparing religions has a history in the academy,⁶ in which Wiebe has drawn attention to the problem of “motive and method” in the study of religion as an academic exercise.⁷ According to Henri Corbin, the allied concept of “comparative philosophy” was first explicitly formulated by Paul Masson-Oursel at the Sorbonne, who saw formal philosophical comparison not so much in terms of likenesses, which can be deceptive, but rather in analogies of relationships (of the type $a/b = c/d$).⁸ Ninian Smart states that “the very heart of the comparative study of religion” is “the comparative analysis of worldviews.”⁹ The formal comparison of traditions may be less technically demanding than the work of specialists, but the methodological considerations are perhaps more challenging. By so saying, degrees of difficulty are not intended; rather, “larger” philosophical considerations must be worked out before bodies of disparate data are to be scientifically¹⁰ compared with heightened methodological awareness.

Philosophy of Religion and the Need to Look to Other Disciplines

Philosophy of religion is the watchdog of religious studies. Its principal corrective value is that it is bias-detective and epistemologically aware. Philosophy of religion can tell us much about credibility, as well as the impingement of worldview on the research enterprise. However, a distinction does obtain

does obtain between methodology (as a philosophical orientation), and research technique (as applied methodology), one is obliged to look elsewhere for specific research strategies.

The present study invokes Platvoet's research strategy of restrictive comparison, which is more amenable to investigative control.¹¹ This still leaves unresolved the problem of research technique, that is, how to effect a meaningful comparison that is intersubjectively available to others in the discipline. That sub-field of Religious Studies that has devoted the most attention to the problem of comparison at the methodological level appears to be anthropology of religion.¹² Because of the relatively recent formation of the discipline, phenomenologists of religion are often obliged to look to disciplines outside the field for methodological approaches. This study looks to philosophy, linguistics, and literary criticism for its principal models (*infra*).

This study will attempt the comparative *metaphorical* analysis of religious doctrines. Neither "truth" nor "logic"¹³ is of primary concern here; rather, it is the metaphorical "lie" which is of principal interest. The metaphorical expression of doctrine allows for both conceptual and expressive comparisons. The present study is interested in drawing a "comparison of comparisons," as it were, as an approach to traditions rich in metaphor. The construction of an explanatory paradigm to account for similarities and differences in symbol motifs encountered in the simultaneous study of two traditions is the goal of this paper. Such endeavor may be said to be the operation of scientific thought on mythopoeic thought.¹⁴ Pursuant to this aim, notice is taken of Wiebe's advocacy of a standard of inquiry of such calibre as to be "structurally indistinguishable from other scientific undertakings."¹⁵

The Nature of Comparison

Comparison has been defined as the attempt "to seek out affinities and oppositions."¹⁶ J. Z. Smith defines: "A comparison is a disciplined exaggeration in the service of knowledge. It lifts out and strongly marks certain features within difference as being of possible intellectual significance."¹⁷ Smith has identified four major modes of comparison: the *ethnographic*, the *encyclopaedic*, the *morphological*, and the *evolutionary*, to what he adds the *statistical*, the *structural*, and "systematic description and comparison."¹⁸

Ideally, comparison should explore for a relationship among disparate sources. The preinterpretative justification for setting an investigative agenda should be made clear. Comparison should attempt to explain why it sees what it sees, and why what it sees is significant. In the investigative quest for the explanatory moment, endeavor should be made to fulfill the explanatory rôle¹⁹ Wiebe²⁰ has tried to establish as a self-defining norm for religious studies.²¹ A purely descriptive phenomenology falls short of the requirements of theory.

It seems that Wiebe is arguing for an explanatory methodological teleology. At any rate, in comparing Syriac Christianity with the Bahá'î Faith, we are theoretically engaging two religious worlds. We are asking the sources for structures. The enterprise undertaken by this study is comparative-systematic (a generalized approach) and not philological-historical (the specifying approach). There is no need here to reduplicate the work of specialists²² except when the crux of an argument so depends. Furthermore, this study will not address the genetic issue of diffusion (borrowing mechanisms) versus independent invention. Rather, our focus falls on questions of typological symmetry (and asymmetry), not problems of historical relationships.

So much for general remarks. What of Smith's septiform taxonomy of comparisons? The present study will opt for a *limited systematic comparison*, in which systematic theology—although a specifically Christian construct—will be used as a general framework of analysis for pairing metaphors and symbols with theological concepts. In so doing, this study seeks to frame a cross-cultural, inter-creedal methodology between traditions, to explore for any patterning common to both Syriac Christian and Bahá'î conceptual systems. The soteriologically efficacious constructs of each will also be compared, the social meaning of which in effect is community-defining. Elements of social patterning, such as sacramental practices, modes of conduct, expressions of art and iconography, and other expressions of faith, lie beyond our purview here.

One's study of religion presumably arose from personal interest: curiosity, often, in many cases, religiosity. Impulses (insofar as they are not intrusive biases) need not be inventoried; they may be assumed. At some point along the path of investigation, however, a conversion took place in the academic's intellectual history in which the investigator is "reborn" as an academic, to a calling which is a vocation in its own right. This calling is not "higher". Religious Studies, purely, is not value-oriented,²³ though the discipline is oriented towards

value systems. Ideally, a “preliminary neutralization of the ideological factor”²⁴ shall have taken place, though this need not preclude the bicameral life of the scholar as a holder of values, religious or humanist.

Effort will be made to write meaningfully beyond simple discursive clarity, in the way Wilfred Cantwell Smith recommends: “*it is the business of comparative religion to construct statements about religion that are intelligible within at least two traditions simultaneously.*”²⁵ This is really an open-ended variation on the “emic” approach of the phenomenologist of religion, in which the self-defining characteristics of any religion is taken as validating (but not as the only verificatory criterion).²⁶ The most challenging requirement of the comparative enterprise may also prove the most elusive. The much vaunted and yet criticized use of the comparative method has, above all, eluded consensus, a problem Smith sums up well: “But the ‘how’ and the ‘why’ and, above all, ‘so what’ remain most refractory.”²⁷ This study is exploratory; it does not promise to repay the investigator with the scholar’s peak experience described by Smith as “the thrill of encountering a coincidence”, but the quest remains the same:

The discovery that two events, symbols, thoughts, or texts, while so utterly separated by time and space that they could not “really” be connected, seem, nevertheless, to be the same or to be speaking directly to another raises the possibility of a secret interconnection of things that is the scholar’s most cherished article of faith. The thought that the patterns and interrelationships that he has patiently and laboriously teased out of his data might, in fact, exist is the claim he makes when his work is completed as well as the claim that appears to be denied by the fact that he has had to labor so long. ...And this is why coincidence is, at one and the same time, so exhilarating and so stunning. It is as if, unbidden and unearned by work and interpretation, a connection simply “chose” to make itself manifest, to display its presence on our conceptual wall with a clear round hand.²⁸

Discovery is its own reward. Not every study will repay the investigator in this way. The chances of a comparative study contributing significantly to the advancement of knowledge within the discipline of Religious Studies is, on the one hand, limited by the lack of consensus on comparative methodology itself, yet, on the other hand, favored by the relatively open and uncanonized state of scholarship on matters comparative.

Data-Selection and Interpretation

Quarries of Metaphors

In this study, two traditions rich in metaphorical expression will be compared: the Bahâ'î Faith and Syriac Christianity.²⁹ Each of these traditions is of intrinsic interest in its own right. The interpretive move to identify these two traditions as sources for comparison along with a determination of their potential intellectual significance is admittedly the unobjectivized theoretical assumption of the author. The present writer has drawn on these two traditions for reasons of research interest³⁰ as well as for their presumed metaphorical commensurability.

The impulse for such a comparison and the rationale behind such a choice deserves an explanation. The choice of these two traditions is admittedly arbitrary, but the idea struck the present writer during the reading of a Syriac text. A passage from Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), *Hymns on the Nativity* 21:20, struck a chord in the author's mind with a passage from Bahâ'u'llâh (d. 1892), "Tablet of Divine Unity" (*Lawḥ-i Tawḥîd*). In favor of the comparison, it can be said of the Syriac and Bahâ'î traditions that the source material is abundant and, to a considerable degree, accessible in original and in translation. This lends a certain convenience; it does not of itself invite comparison. This study, then, will attempt to draw intellectual significance from the many expressive similarities one finds in the writings of Ephrem the Syrian († 373) and Bahâ'u'llâh († 1892).

A Tale of Two World-Formers: Saint Ephrem the Syrian and Bahâ'u'llâh

Ephrem, The Poet of the Christian Paradox:³¹

Saint Ephrem the Syrian is arguably the greatest poet of the patristic age.³² Syriac Christianity, from its obscure origins, slowly crystallized "as a sort of precipitate in a cloudy solution."³³ Edessa, on the frontier between East and West, is the possible origin of the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Odes of Solomon*.³⁴ There, Ephrem's congregation, at one time known as the "Palutians" (after

Addai's disciple Palut)³⁵ was but one of a welter of competing forms of Christianity. Early in the fourth century, a Edessene could witness the success of Bardaisanite Christianity, of Manichaeism and Marcionism. In the Syriac *Life of Ephrem*, it is said that nine heresies flourished in Edessa prior to the last decade of his life.

Of the life of Saint Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), the one Syrian revered by all of Christendom, two hagiographic accounts are extant in Syriac.³⁶ The most credible biographical details, however, are to be found in the *Encomium* pronounced on Ephraim by Gregory of Nyssa (d. 395). What occasioned this *Encomium* was the fact that the early Church annually observed a commemoration of Ephrem, i.e. the liturgical commemoration on the "Saint's Day," normally observed on the anniversary of the death of the saint. In the East the date was set at January 28th; in the West, the 1st of February. Ephrem's tomb resides in the monastery of St. Sergius on the Mount of Edessa. According to the *Edessene Chronicle*, Ephrem died on 9 June 373.

Gregory assures us that his account derived from Ephrem's writings and from no other source. As there is no evidence to suppose that Gregory knew Syriac, it is likely the case that the writings of Ephrem were translated at a very early date into Greek. Other Greek authorities include three fifth-century historians, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret, as well as Jerome and Palladius. The details of these biographies have been presented and analyzed by J. Gwynn.³⁷

Born c. 306 AD, Ephrem was a native of the frontier-city of Nisibis (*Nṣībīn*). He grew up under the spiritual tutelage of Bishop Jacob of Nisibis, who was present at the Council of Nicea in 325. Tradition relates how Ephrem composed hymns and sung them to the harp, teaching lyrics and music to the "Daughters of the Covenant."³⁸

The writings of Ephrem afford a Christian counterpart to those of Bahá'u'lláh in respect of their highly metaphorical nature.³⁹ An objection might be raised that we are comparing two different sorts of religious personalities here, which is a fair criticism. Bahá'u'lláh was considerably more than a poet or a deacon. Within the Bahá'í religious system, Bahá'u'lláh is functionally parallel to Christ and not to Ephrem. Since no claim is being made in this study to the truth or veracity of Bahá'u'lláh's mission, suffice it to say that comparison of the writings of these two great personalities still lends itself insofar as meta-

phorical analysis is concerned.

Bahâ'u'llâh and the Vision of World Unity

Bahâ'u'llâh (1817–1892) is the prophet-founder of the present-day Bahâ'î Faith. According to Bausani's typology of monotheisms, the Bahâ'î Faith is a "monotheism proper" of a secondary order, in that it is the daughter religion of the "primary" monotheism, Islam, as Christianity is to Judaism.⁴⁰ In strictly numerical terms, the religion which owes its origin to this figure is relatively insignificant, with a following of only several million adherents. In terms of diffusion, however, the statistics are arresting. In its report on "World Religious Statistics" for the previous year, the 1988 *Britannica Book of the Year* names the Bahâ'î Faith alongside Christianity and Islam as the "most universal" of today's world religions. By a simple account of the number of sovereign and non-sovereign countries and territories in which it is formally established, the Bahâ'î Faith emerges as the most widely-diffused religion in the world except for Christianity.⁴¹ A recent sociological study of the Bahâ'î community of Denmark will give a fair representation of how the Bahâ'î Faith has established itself in the West.⁴²

One heuristic key for comparing early Syrian Christian and Bahâ'î systems is soteriology.⁴³ Saint Ephrem and Bahâ'u'llâh instantiate two distinct soteriological paradigms. Bahâ'u'llâh's vision of world unity is pervasive; it animates his thought and legislation, structuring the greater part of his socially-oriented "revelations." In Bahâ'î thought, the human condition is not simply one of sin and estrangement from God. It is one of wounded unity. Unity is perceived a spiritual as well as biological and social reality. The recovery of that unity is the Bahâ'î quest to regain Paradise lost. Christian theology might call this "mutual salvation."

Christ is not central to this vision. Bahâ'u'llâh's prophetic genius is. Thus, in a study such as this, these two soteriological figures—Christ (within Ephrem's vision of the savior) and Bahâ'u'llâh—and, respectively, some of their more important metaphors, are to be compared. On the ethical level, their call is similar. Christ called upon his first followers to become "fishers of men." Bahâ'u'llâh's call invites the people of the world to become "quickeners of mankind." How this compares and contrasts with Ephrem will be brought

out in our thematically-oriented discussion below, in which doctrines will be paired with salient motifs.

Architectonics, Methodology, Hypothesis

Methodology, the “logic of research,”⁴⁴ is not method *stricto sensu*; but the latter, as practical application, should arise from the former. Any comparison between two conceptual systems of spirituality has to be sensitive to differences, however overt or subtle. This having been said, it is likewise the enterprise of comparison to stake out similarities, and to comment on their significances. Generally, the enterprise of comparison is said to encompass one or more of the following: (1) Forms; (2) Functions; (3) Structures; (4) Meanings.⁴⁵

Key to the present study is the correlation of two bodies of religious data: expressive (in terms of stylistics), and conceptual (involving doctrinal content). It is recognized that metaphorical commensurability is no guarantor of doctrinal affinity. Wherever appropriate, a discussion of key conceptual terms may prove illuminative. Neither the adducing of parallels nor the adducing of dissimilarities must blur the respective contours of each. It is, after all, the contours that are to be compared—the shape of doctrine and the vision of experience—not the mass of details. Once this is done, underlying thought structures may be discerned, or at least hypothesized. The utility of the comparative method is that it serves as a phenomenological tool. As such, the religions themselves are dissolved in the solution:

Comparison does not deal with phenomena *in toto* or in the round, but only with an aspectual characteristic of them. ...The comparability of phenomena always depends both on the purpose of comparison and on a theoretically informed analysis. Neither phenomenologically whole entities nor their local meanings are preserved in comparison. What matters in comparison are certain variables that are posited by and cohere in theories and that are aligned with aspects of the phenomena to be compared through some set of correspondence rules.⁴⁶

Vulnerable to criticism particularly from specialists, comparison offers one distinct advantage: it can address larger issues pertaining to phenomena of religiosity. Comparison, moreover, helps us to understand the worldviews

of various religious communities.

At the conclusion of this paper, the results of comparison will be applied to the two religions themselves, fulfilling one of the implicative functions of the academic exercise, *viz.*, what Rudolph terms “the ideologically critical”: to wit, “the dispute, from the point of view of historically-gained insights, with the religions’ own self-understanding, and the decisive demarcation of the differences from individual theologies (dogmatisms) and religious movements.”⁴⁷

Architectonic Theory: The Philosophical Basis of the Comparison

D. Dilworth has developed a global hermeneutic of philosophical first principles, a sophisticated approach to past works of human genius that constitute the vital ideological resources of civilization. Dilthey proceeds to examine the macro-structures of philosophies East and West in terms of their major theory-formations. In outline, Dilthey’s architecture of theories is comprised of four overarching paradigms or modalities,⁴⁸ each with its own synoptic character:⁴⁹ Beneath the four archic variables (perspective, reality, method, principle) are configurations of specific archic values:

ARCHIC MATRIX OF THE PURE MODES

	<i>PERSPECTIVE</i>	<i>REALITY</i>	<i>METHOD</i>	<i>PRINCIPLE</i>
SOPHISTIC	<i>personal</i>	<i>existential</i>	<i>agonistic</i>	<i>creative</i>
DEMOCRITEAN	<i>objective</i>	<i>material</i>	<i>logistic</i>	<i>elemental</i>
PLATONIC	<i>diaphanic</i>	<i>noumenal</i>	<i>dialectical</i>	<i>comprehensive</i>
ARISTOTELIAN	<i>disciplinary</i>	<i>essential</i>	<i>synoptic</i>	<i>reflexive</i>

As a heuristic tool, Dilthey has constructed a set of archic principles which makes possible a comparative hermeneutic of first principles in a cross-cultural approach to the world religions. Dilthey's archic profiles represent a synoptic mapping of the major differences found throughout the worlds of philosophy and religion. In this mapping, the archic profile of Syriac Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith will be found to closely compare. On the basis of the chart above, it becomes apparent that the Western religions, more or less, reflect the Platonic mode. The next chart, presented below, is modelled on Dilworth with the present writer's inclusion of the Bahá'í Faith, and represents the approach which will be taken in this study, following Dilworth's dictum: "*Each of the world religions makes a profound contribution to civilization. An architectonic theory, which would consider each one on its own terms, provides the proper framework for such an investigation.*"⁵⁰ ("Architectonic" is used here in the sense of "governing".) Below follow the archic configurations of four Western religions:

ARCHIC PROFILE OF THE WESTERN RELIGIONS

	<i>PERSPECTIVE</i>	<i>REALITY</i>	<i>METHOD</i>	<i>PRINCIPLE</i>
Written Torah	<i>diaphanic</i>	<i>essentialist</i>	<i>dialectical</i>	<i>creative</i>
New Testament	<i>diaphanic</i>	<i>noumenal</i>	<i>dialectical</i>	<i>creative</i>
Qur'ân	<i>diaphanic</i>	<i>noumenal</i>	<i>agonistic</i>	<i>creative</i>
Bahá'í Writings	<i>diaphanic</i>	<i>noumenal</i>	<i>dialectical</i>	<i>creative</i>

Perspective: This is the text's voice, its self-validating epistemic warrant. The "authorizing voice of a world-text"—in this case, sacred scriptures as immortal texts—takes a "diaphonic" form with respect to the four Western religions. Dilworth defines the diaphanic perspective so:

This is the standard voice of religious texts. It bears witness to a higher wisdom or the revelation of an absolute knowledge, of which the text constitutes a transparent, self-transcending medium. This is the authorizing perspective of all sacred scriptures and their theological traditions, and also of various philosophers who speak of or for God ...⁵¹

“All texts,” Dilthey writes, “convey meaning in assertive (propositional), active (morally and politically agential), and exhibitiv (aesthetic, performative) modes of expression or judgment.”⁵² This agrees with Wiebe’s controversial contention that all religious statements may be analyzed in terms of their propositions, however masked those propositions may be. For the purposes of this study, the “exhibitiv” form of religious statements will complement their propositionally prosaic counterparts and, in the absence of the latter, supplement.

Ontological Focus: “Reality” indicates the text’s reference to what is ultimately real, not just apparent. The Christian and Bahá’î traditions share a common ontological commitment. Their “noumenal” sense of reality is one that transcends appearances. It refers to a “transphenomenal, supersensible, and eternally perfect realm or activity.”⁵³

Concept Formation, or Method: “Method” represents the text’s logical or conceptual form. The dialectical method, common to both Christianity and the Bahá’î Faith, is one in which “one observes a logic of higher agreement, which presupposes and accomplishes a synthetic unity of opposites, contrasts, or multiplicities. Partial, abstract views are subsumed and reconciled—whether aesthetically, actively, or propositionally—in an emerging whole.”⁵⁴ In fine, a dialectical method is sublational.⁵⁵

One of the limitations of Dilthey’s otherwise useful system of comparative hermeneutic is seen in the case of Islam. In his trinary representation of “Old Testament”, New Testament, and “Koran,” Dilthey ascribes to Islam the “agonistic” method. Agonistic (or “Paradoxical”) method is one which “obeys the logic of contending forces, or of contrasting concepts, which cannot be reconciled through some higher agreement. It is adversative in formal proposition.”⁵⁶ Dilthey justifies his representation of the Qur’ân’s mode of concept-formation as agonistic since this “accounts for the concept of holy war, which

is a conspicuous feature of Islamic teaching.”⁵⁷ By contrast, it should be noted, Bahá'u'lláh's first legislative act in 1863 was the repudiation of holy war and a peace paradigm (modelled on concentric unities) subsequently legislated in its stead.

In fairness to Islam, the agonistic mode may be applicable only to systems of law. A Sûfî mystic certainly exemplifies the dialectical method of concept-formation. This weakens somewhat the formal requirement of explanatory adequacy, not necessarily of Dilthey's system, but rather of his categorical description of Islam. A typology exhibit predictive powers, but it must never be a determinant. Dilthey's system works if it is seen as formulating tendencies rather than laws. In fairness to Dilthey, the “heteroarchic” nature of certain texts is conceded.

Principles: “Principle” represents the text's motivating and integrating intention. The “creative” principle is volitional. As Dilthey explains:

The creative principle emphasizes making a difference (the opposite of sameness), in which the new replaces the old. It generally functions as an assumption of volitional efficacy in the making of fact—of will-power, work, and effort, whether human or divine.⁵⁸

Having established, on the basis of Dilthey's framework of analysis, equitable comparability at the level of first principles between Christianity and the Bahá'î Faith, we now proceed to the points of comparison of a secondary order.

Rules of Correspondence

On the present state of scholarship as it relates to comparative method, Smith observes: “The issue confronting the enterprise of religious comparison is not so much one of a lack of data, as one of inadequate theory ranging from matters of classification to more complex matters of interpretation and explanation.”⁵⁹ It should come as no surprise therefore that, within the discipline of Religious Studies itself, precedents to which the present study can appeal are, for the most part, of a philosophical nature, rather than research in which principles of comparison are demonstrably applied.

It is fairly obvious that comparative procedures must first invoke significant parallels in two or more bodies of data. This study will interpretatively proceed in the direction of correlating metaphors common to both Syriac Christian and Bahâ'î traditions as possible manifestations of common root metaphors.

A study such as this is bound to encounter the problem of parallel image-patterns with different ideological commitments. In these cases, some advice by William H. Hallo may be appropriate, in that "a comparative approach that is truly objective must be broad enough to embrace the possibility of a negative comparison, i.e., a contrast. And contrast can be every bit as illuminating as (positive) comparison."⁶⁰ Divergent conceptual associations borne by the same metaphors present in both traditions will be explained in terms of the filtering process which images from root metaphors undergo. Symbols identical in image but having discretely different doctrinal disclosures may still exhibit functional affinity. In the course of "image-hunting", how does one adduce a true parallel? Archibald Hill has formulated a good rule of thumb:

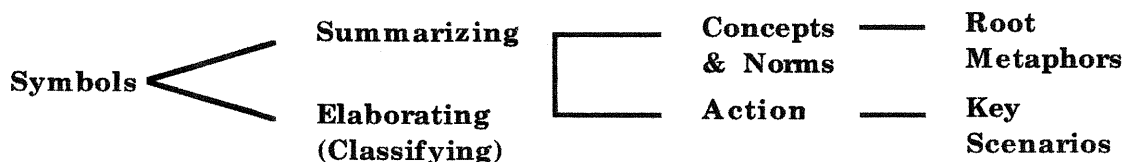
We can now, I believe, state two general principles governing possible semantic parallels. First, the likelihood of the parallel being significant is approximately doubled with each additional item which is added to form or extend a cluster. Second, when there is a parallel involving the order of items, the likelihood of significance is further multiplied by a number which is the factorial of the number of items in the parallel.⁶¹

What is the significance of a parallel? Apart from any consideration of a genetic relationship, Hill declares: "In actuality parallelism, overt or hidden, is one of our most powerful tools for uncovering depth meanings."⁶²

Working Hypothesis and Its Recombinant Possibilities

The hypothesis to be tested is this: metaphors and symbols in the Bahâ'î Faith compare closely with those in Syriac Christianity due to the operation of immanental, superordinating "root metaphors" common to each; conceptual differences that arise from these affective congruences may be explained at the level of performance or action. Such differences may be illustrated in the schematic below, which will be employed independent of its original theoretical context⁶³ and adapted to the discussion at hand:

SYMBOL IN MYTH & RITUAL



In this representation of symbols, according to the present writer's adaptation of it, root metaphors evolve into symbols that embody or "summarize" religious concepts and norms. The activity of symbols⁶⁴ is seen in cult and sacrament, where symbol takes on a performative rôle in its creative or reconstitutive operations. Action instantiates its symbols. In the cultic domain, if we accept the Weberian idea that ideology influences behavior, somehow the bifurcation of root metaphors into divergent ideologies and practices (e.g., differences systematically related to ethos and behavior) may be have to be resolved at the analogical level of functional equivalence. In any event, the root metaphors may be differentiated from key scenarios. For example, Bahâ'î tradition has altogether dispensed with the account of the Fall and would be quite Pelagian in its interpretation of it anyway.

A hypothesis that tries to account for both similarities and differences is one that is at once "straining to identify the underlying pattern of stability of religious phenomena" while trying "to come to terms with the change factor: the moving, inconstant, spontaneous, irregular, discontinuous, non-forensic, once-only, explosive, surprise element."⁶⁵ To a certain extent, method must be specific to the data under study, yet any comparative study is implicitly a statement about comparative method. Terminological and philosophical comparisons (*intellectualist* theory), generally, represent the norm for formal comparisons of religious documents as primary sources. The present study is principally concerned with *symbolist* theory: it is felt that, given that religious thinking is partly structured on non-discursive images or symbols, the metaphorical approach might serve as a complement.

The Question of Commensurability

To make explicit some assumptions about these two traditions, both are literate traditions, both are scriptural traditions, and both, to greater or lesser degrees, are highly metaphorical. It is this latter dimension (first-order data) that invites comparison (second-order theory). Given the Islamic background of the Bahâ'î Faith, it is noteworthy that, already, Tor Andrae had conjectured a Syriac Christian provenance for the Qur'ân's description of Paradise.⁶⁶ Beck took up this suggestion and explored it further.⁶⁷ Questions of Qur'anic and Syriac imagery apart, Bahâ'î and Syriac Christian⁶⁸ traditions are distant enough in paradigm and history to afford a true comparison of distinctly different traditions. Yet both share structural and doctrinal elements common to the Abrahamic Faiths with their Persian eschatological tinges. Does typological likeness require geneology? There are no foregone conclusions in this study; it is, rather, exploratory.

Bahâ'î and Syriac traditions appear to exhibit expressive commensurability. The implications of commensurability raise another, more fundamental question: can metaphors from each tradition—even the soteriological figures themselves—be transposed, and still work? Can these two traditions meaningfully engage in each other's metaphors? It seems that such a test—a test of expressive interchangeability—might provide a basis for saying that two conceptual systems of spirituality exhibit a high degree of structural commensurability. If true, this obviously has implications for interfaith dialogue, though the present study is interested more in the methodology of comparison rather than in its implications. The categories of comparison will follow, more or less, those established in Beggiani's *Early Syriac Theology*,⁶⁹ beginning with the theme of the first chapter, "The Hiddenness of God."

What is so distinct about Syriac Christianity relative to other forms of the Christian faith? When one steps across the linguistic frontier of the Latin West and the Greek East into the spiritual frontier of the Syriac Orient, the Christian landscape suddenly becomes a Semitic hinterland, the inner landscape tintured with a rich array of metaphors, expressions twinned with spiritual experience. Largely absent here are the enormous debts to classical philosophy and its categories so pronounced in Hellenistic Christianity. In early Syriac Christianity, there was no effort to forge a synthesis between classical

thought and Christian doctrine. Instead, native metaphors, rooted in vivid Semitisms, punctuate the literary horizon.

Qualitatively, one significant difference between the mainstream Church of the Greco–Latin world and that of Oriental Christianity may lie in the realm of noëtics. The antithetical and substantial logic of Aristotle—introduced into Christian theology by medieval scholars—is said to have been rooted in the *haptic* (tactile) cognition of reality. The metaphoric way of expression in Oriental Christianity, on the other hand, is the manifestation of the logic of assimilations and identifications in the optical cognition of reality. This is really a carryover from Semitic spirituality, possibly mediated through some form of Jewish Christianity.⁷⁰

In Syriac Christianity, therefore, one finds the perspective approach in which the proximal is synthesized with the distantal, giving rise to metaphoric expressions, parables, symbolic deeds and visions.⁷¹ This orientation expresses itself in Syriac Christian poetry as paradox and symbol, rather than by definition and analysis one finds in Christian prose.

The present writer makes no claims to interpretive perspicuity. The comparative approach taken in this study will be straightforward, even if it must proceed from the obvious and simplistic. Every effort will be made to render this study intersubjectively available. In the relative absence of any comparative methodology canonized by consensus, one will be devised appropriate to the source material.

It would be worthwhile at this juncture to define symbol, metaphor and paradox—both in terms of modern literary theory and Ephrem's special vocabulary.

Symbol

Syriac Christianity gave voice to its truths in symbolic rather than in philosophical fashion.⁷² This is evident in the key technical terms Ephrem employs in relation to his symbolic universe: *râzâ* (symbol), *tûpsâ* (type), *peletâ* (allegory), *dmûta* (simile), *matlâ* (parable), *maḥzîta* (mirror), *ṭellâlâ* (shadow),⁷³ *nîšâ* (sign).⁷⁴ The Bahâ'î Writings, too, are rich in the use of analogy and metaphorical language.

The use of such language does not merely illustrate and supplement demonstrative statements of doctrine. Metaphorical texts may in fact communicate more vividly and fully the experiential dimension of non-discursive truth. A metaphor is more evocative than literal discourse. Figurative speech, from a cognitive perspective, requires a certain level of competence to decode. The same may be said of metaphorical and symbolic modes of discourse in religious texts. A certain competence is required to understand it.

But even the lack of such competence may not greatly diminish the social impact of such expression in a communal setting. Ephrem's hymns, such as the cycle known as the *Hymns of Paradise*, were liturgical. Choirs of virgins intoned them in melodies already familiar to the congregation. In such cases, we could picture any hymn, drawing on a biblical narrative, performing subtle exegesis in the process, going over the head of an untrained listener. The exegesis might be lost on the listener, but its language will still have its impact in structuring religious consciousness. In any event, by the very nature of such language, even a high level of metaphorical competence is not likely to exhaust the interpretive possibilities.

Symbols, in the present writer's view, are encoded metaphors. Symbols are the haunts of metaphorical ghosts, so to speak. To the extent that symbols, as numinous archives of meaning, incorporate ideas, they may be said to hypothesize them. Cain proposes what is one of the simpler approaches to symbol, in which symbol mediates between subject and numen:⁷⁵

Numen
Symbol
Object Symbolized
Subject Symbolized (Man)

By “numen” is meant the signified, extra-rational, sacred reality, the believer’s universe, the referent, which is empirically unverifiable. (No ontological commitment is made in postulating this symbolic domain.) Typically, symbols find their “fulfillment” in ritual, dream, or vision; they may likewise be “realized” in the presented through an act of identification, even if that be an exegetical one.

Another useful framework of analysis, similar in some respects to the paradigm above, may be developed from Ricoeur’s⁷⁶ theory of symbol. The key to Ricoeur’s thought is his formula: “*Le symbole donne à penser.*” (“Symbol invites thought.”)⁷⁷

For Ricoeur, the symbol is a two-dimensional phenomenon, unifying dual universes of discourse: (1) linguistically, symbols exhibit metaphoricity; and (2) pre-semantically, symbols are rooted in the depths of human experience, from which derives their evocative power. Behind symbolization, figuration will be assumed to exist.⁷⁸ Symbolism, in this author’s view, is a transformation of metaphoricity, in its iconic function in representing non-physical, or spiritual, reality. Not the ontology; but the interpretive “reality” is of immediate hermeneutical concern.

According to Yousif, the Syriac term *râzâ* had four senses in Ephrem's usage of it:

(1) **Enigma:** In the original Persian loan-word which made its way into imperial Aramaic, "*râzâ*" originally denoted a royal "secret." Its occurrence in the Aramaic of the Book of Daniel 6:4 clearly carries the sense of divine secrets. See Ephrem, *On the Unleavened Bread* 14:11.

(2) **Mystery:** The Greek word *mustrion* (*mystērion*)⁸⁸ became the standard rendering of *râzâ*. The term *râzâ* could also be used to refer to a reality surpassing human intelligence. See Ephrem, *On the Crucifixion* 8:5.

(3) **A Simple Sign:** Nature affords many instances of symbols, symbols which proclaim Christ. See Ephrem, *Hymn on Faith* 18.

(4) **Symbol-Mystery:** This sense of the term *râzâ* embraces notions of Christ-bearing "types" secreted in the Hebrew scriptures and of "Sacraments" in the Christian mystic initiations, including the waters of baptism.⁸⁹ The English rendering of "symbol" for *râzâ* is terminologically but not conceptually equivalent for, as Brock is careful to point out,⁹⁰ "symbol" in the works of the Fathers differs from the rather static significatory sense of "symbol" common in modern usage. In Syriac Christian usage especially, "symbol" participates in that which it represents. "Symbol" conjoins two realities. The Patristic concept accords dynamic power to the symbol. In the plural, *râzê* comes to represent the "Mysteries" or Sacraments, in which the worshipper literally partakes of both symbol and its reality. In Ephrem's symbolic universe, all creation is suffusedly metaphoric of a higher reality:

Wherever you turn your eyes, there is God's symbol;
Whatever you read, you will find there His types.⁹¹

Ephrem speaks chiasmically of "the symbol (*râzâ*) and its prototype (*tpnk'*), the truth (*šrârâ*) and its shadow (*tellâlâ*)." (*Hymns on Virginity* 14:7).⁹² Symbol and shadow are equivalent, while prototype and truth are likewise synonymous. He speaks even of the episode of Jesus at the Wedding Feast at Cana as intrinsically a "mirror" (*mahzûâ*) in which "allegories" (*sing.: peletâ*) are expounded

and traced" (*Hymns on Virginity* 33:1).⁹³ Indeed, everything in nature and in scripture is emblematic of Jesus, for:

He has entered into fulfillment and put on the garment
of the symbols woven for him by the Holy Spirit.⁹⁴

Christ is pictured here as having put on a garment of symbols. Both as the agent of Creation and its teleological fulfillment, there is nothing for Ephrem. As to scripture, Ephrem says: "The scattered symbols (sing.: *râzâ*) You have gathered from the Torah toward Your beauty, and You set forth the prototypes (sing.: *tpnk'*) in Your gospel" (*Hymns on Virginity* 28:2).⁹⁵ Although there is a parallelism struck here between symbol and prototype, these two terms are not, according to McVey, interchangeable.⁹⁶ Scripturally, as far as the Torah is concerned, Ephrem sees everything as a prefigurement of things Christian. Exegetically, Ephrem's practice of seeing pagans as "Christians by symbolic anticipation" accords with his finding a *râzâ* of the Gentiles in the stone of Jacob at Genesis 26:3. Remarkably, Ephrem often interprets the blessings of Jacob to refer to the heathen nations rather than to the tribes of Israel!⁹⁷ In *Hymns on Virginity* 8:3, 6, 8, Ephrem see the prefigurement of Christ represented everywhere — in Nature as well as in Scripture:

In scripture He is written; in nature He is engraved...

Revelations gazed at You; similes awaited You;
Symbols expected You; likenesses longed for You;
parables took refuge in You...

His power perfected the types, and His truth the symbols,
His interpretation the similies, His explanation the sayings,
and His assurances the difficulties.⁹⁸

Ephrem's concept of symbol is pervasive and corresponds with his mystical view of reality. In this symbolic universe, the following dimensions appear:

SCRIPTURAL SYMBOLS

Typological		<i>"Chain of the Sons of Light"</i> ⁹⁹		
		⇒Adam	⇒Moses	⇒Christ ⇒Return of Christ
		Three stages:		
Past	1.	"Eden":	Symbol	(<i>rāzâ</i>)
Present	2.	"Church":	Reality	(<i>šrārâ</i>)
Future	3.	"Kingdom":	Fulfillment	(<i>hûttām</i>)

Allegorical		<i>"The Way"</i> of Salvation History		
		⇒Eden	⇒Zion	⇒Church ⇒Kingdom ¹⁰⁰
		Three stages:		
Past	1.	"Egypt":	Symbol	(<i>rāzâ</i>)
Present	2.	"Church":	Reality	(<i>šrārâ</i>)
Future	3.	"Kingdom":	Sealing	(<i>hûttām</i>) ¹⁰¹

The above chart corresponds somewhat with the *x*-axis in Murray's schematic representation of Ephrem's symbolic thinking,¹⁰² though Murray might disavow the use of the term "allegorical." Corresponding with Murray's *y*-axis is the consideration of symbols drawn from Nature below:

NATURE SYMBOLS¹⁰³

Mineral
Vegetative/Boreal
Animal
Celestial
Divine

Rounding out this rather Aristotelian scheme of ascending Kingdoms is the rôle of sacramental symbolism in the Ephrem's system:

SACRAMENTAL SYMBOLS

Baptism¹⁰⁴

Chrism

The Eucharist

These three domains of the symbolic become quite obvious from even a cursory reading. Though such a conclusion had been independently drawn by the present writer, this three-fold categorization of Ephrem's symbolism had already been noted by McVey.¹⁰⁵

Attention thus far has not been given to the Bahâ'î conception of symbol. Consider the opening line from one of Bahâ'u'llâh's celebrated prayers, known as the Tablet of Aḥmad: "*He is the King, the All-Knowing, the Wise! Lo, the Nightengale of Paradise singeth upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity, with holy and sweet melodies, proclaiming to the sincere ones the glad-tidings of the nearness of God, calling the believers in the Divine Unity to the court of the presence of the Generous One, informing the severed ones of the message that hath been revealed by God, the King, the Glorious, the Peerless, guiding the lovers to the seat of sanctity and to this resplendent Beauty.*"¹⁰⁶ The late Orientalist Allesandro Bausani has written an important article on "Some Aspects of the Bahâ'î Expressive Style"¹⁰⁷ in which he analyzes the symbolic import of such a motif in the unconscious Bahâ'î reading of it. Though the article is written from his Bahâ'î faith-perspective, Bausani's vocation as an Orientalist had enriched that perspective considerably. In his analysis of the Bahâ'î symbolic vision, Bausani writes:

An expression like: "*the dove of eternity sings on the branches of the Ṭubá tree* (the name of a tree symbolic of Muslim paradise)" is susceptible to three levels of interpretation:

- a) *realistic level*: in a pretty garden on a verdant tree a dove sings fascinating melodies.
- b) *mystic-symbolic level*: in the Gardens of Paradise, outside of this lowly world, saints and blessed ones sing the praises of God.

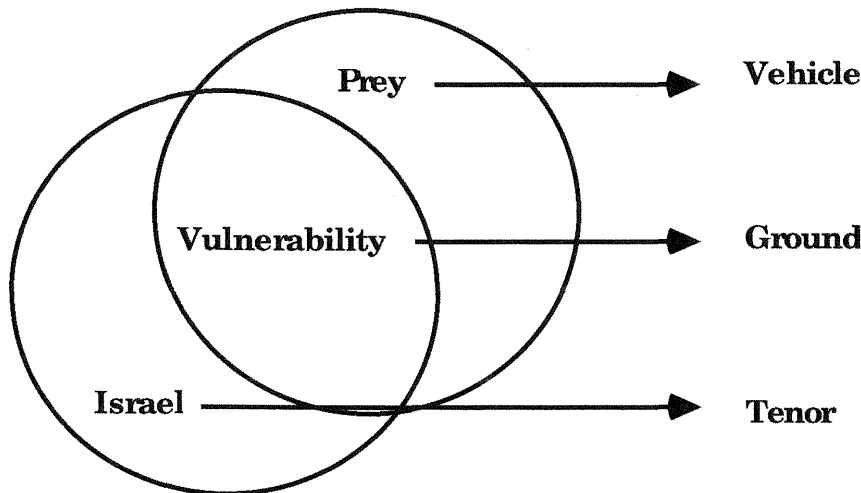
- c) *realistic-symbolic level*: Bahâ'u'llâh at an exact moment in our time sends forth into the world a renewing spirit that will recreate it and give it form again in unitary visible forms, revealing His Writings in a definite place on the earth (the vicinity of Mt. Carmel). The spatial and temporal concreteness, therefore, remains but makes itself translucent with eternity.¹⁰⁸

I think this expression, “*translucent with eternity*,” instructive. In speaking of symbols, one inevitably encounters discussions of the symbol’s opacity. A symbol is opaque until it is understood. For the one to whom the symbol makes sense, the symbol is translucent, at once a way of looking at the present reality, and at the same time affording a glimpse of the white shadows of the spiritual world to which a Bahâ’î is ontologically committed. According to Bausani’s analysis, in practice symbols two-ways mirrors rendering the present reality “*translucent with eternity*”.

Metaphor

“Metaphorical thought” wrote Max Black, “is a distinctive mode of achieving insight, not to be construed as an ornamental substitute for plain thought.”¹⁰⁹ A metaphor may be thought of as the overlap of two meanings.¹¹⁰ This may be represented graphically¹¹¹ as follows, in reference to the verse, “Why, then, has Israel become a prey?” (Jer. 2:14):

Anatomy of a Metaphor



Metaphor¹¹² is the most elaborate of tropes. Traditionally taken to be the most fundamental form of figurative language, most theorists agree that a metaphor is based on association and, in its dynamic effect, triggers some kind of transference of meaning in the mind of the reader. Younger states: “The power of metaphor derives precisely from the interplay between the discordant meanings it symbolically coerces into a unitary conceptual framework and from the degree to which that coercion is successful in overcoming the psychic resistance such semantic tension inevitably generates in anyone in a position to perceive it.”¹¹³ Personification, for example, depends on verbal metaphors, metaphors of action.¹¹⁴

In the metaphor, transference is covert, whereas the simile “*proposes* the transference.”¹¹⁵ Negatively, Levin defines a metaphor as an expression evincing, in its composition, a degree of linguistic deviance, in which the meaning of a word swerves from its lexically codified usage. Due to their oddity, metaphors require first to be construed before being understood.¹¹⁶

Positively, Ricoeur argues that metaphor, by virtue of its semantic innovation, “is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality.”¹¹⁷ Rice and Schofer define metaphor

as follows: “Metaphor is characterized by a semantic and referential relationship made possible by the possession of one or more semantic features.”¹¹⁸ This definition, based as it is on resemblance or similarity, does not differ appreciably from traditional notions. Beyond mere juxtaposition, in highly-encoded metaphors, there are condensed numerous intersections of meanings, which are said to “contaminate” each other.¹¹⁹

In simpler terms, Thompson speaks of “metaphoric unity” in a text rich in figurative language, in which that unity interrelates imagistic elements of the text “vertically”: “Metaphoric unity,” writes Thompson, “...occurs all at once; that is, a metaphor consists of simultaneous ‘vertical’ layers of language analogous to a musical chord.”¹²⁰ Moreover, a metaphor “identifies rather than compares two elements,”¹²¹ though Thompson does not pursue the implications of this contrast to simile.

In the *Hymns on Paradise* 11:6, Ephrem borrows from rhetoric a key hermeneutical term—metaphor—predicated of theophanic discourse. This, in turn, leads to an expression of qualified negative theology in the reading of scripture:

If someone concentrates his attention solely
On the metaphors used of God’s majesty,
He abuses and misrepresents that majesty and thus errs
By means of those metaphors
With which God has clothed Himself for man’s own benefit.¹²²

In the *Hymns on Faith* 31:6–7, the striking image of a parrot being taught to speak from behind a mirror expresses Ephrem’s view of scripture:

Let us give thanks to God Who clothed Himself in the names
of the body’s various parts:
Scripture refers to His “ears,” to teach us that He listens to us;
It speaks of His “eyes,” to show that He sees us...

Refrain: *Blessed is He Who has appeared to our human race
under so many metaphors.*

... He clothed Himself in our language, so that He might clothe us
in His mode of life. He asked for our form and put this on,

and then, as a father with His children, He spoke with our childish state.
It is our metaphors that He put on¹²³ – though He did not literally do so...

A person who is teaching a parrot to speak
hides behind a mirror and teaches it in this way:
When the bird turns in the direction of the voice which is speaking
it finds in front of its eyes its own resemblance reflected;
it imagines that it is another parrot, conversing with itself.
The man puts the bird's image in front of it,
so that thereby it might learn how to speak.¹²⁴

Paradox

In the hymns of Ephrem the Syrian, we encounter a further interpretive challenge in that, superadded to metaphor and symbol, is paradox.¹²⁵ This should not deter us, however. Paradox is logically explorable.¹²⁶ Though rationally a challenge to the intellect, a paradox is supposed to make uncommon sense. Expressively, something is missing in its logical structure, which paradox invites us to resolve.

In *Hymns on Virginity* 7:14, having adstructured the image of oil in procrustean ways as a symbol, Ephem concludes:

The Anointed is all faces and the oil (*mešha*) is just like a mirror;
from wherever I look at the oil the Anointed (*Mešiha*)
looks out at me from within.¹²⁷

Ephrem's metaphorical view of reality is total. Bahâ'u'llâh had a similar metaphorical view of nature. We now proceed to a systematic comparison of Bahâ'î and Syriac Christian metaphors and symbols, and the doctrines with which they are associated, within the framework and categories of systematic theology.

Concept I. The Hiddenness of God Metaphor: The Witness of Watchers and Prophets

Silence and “The Hidden Fourth”

“Glory to that Silent One [God] Who spoke by means of His Voice [Christ].”¹²⁸ In Western religious traditions, doctrines of revelation proceed from the paradox that God is an unsolvable mystery with clues everywhere. This is the classic tension between transcendence and immanence. Nature is God’s handiwork, each created thing bearing the signature of its Artisan as part of some grand design. McVey states that Ephrem was “entranced with the paradox of the Incarnation of the ineffable God and with the Divine presence in Nature and Scripture.”¹²⁹ Though Bahâ’u’llâh rejects outright any doctrine of Incarnation as an unacceptable concretizing of the Immaterial (a major difference that must be acknowledged as such), his doctrine of Revelation bears affinities with that of Ephrem. Both doctrines proceed from the confession of God’s occultation from human ken. There would be no need for a doctrine of revelation if a natural theology were sufficient, had humankind direct epistemological access to the Creator.¹³⁰

What reality lies behind, in Christian terms, the Trinity, or, in Bahâ’î terms, the “Manifestation of God”? The answer might lie in the concept of what has in theology been termed “the hidden Fourth,”¹³¹ the principle of cosmic unity in the extra-divine universe, the “super-essential Unity” spoken of by Dionysius.¹³² As in the Latin West and in the Greek East, Syriac tradition generally acknowledges the incomprehensibility of God.¹³³ One patristic concept involves the idea of a divine Reality existing as a causal prior to any form of divine fiat or theophany. This causal preëxistence of pre-temporal preëxistence is described by the notion of silence. Of God’s hiddenness (*kasyuta*), Ephrem avers:

Refrain: *Praise to the One Being, that is to us unsearchable!*

His aspect cannot be discerned,
that it should be portrayed by our understanding;
He hears without ears; He speaks without mouth;

He works without hands; He sees without eyes.¹³⁴

By implication, this passage suggests that anthropomorphisms are purely referential and have no literal truth value. The paradox of a God Who “speaks without mouth” is resolved when Christ’s rôle as God’s “Voice” enters into the picture. The aural image of a divine fiat without sound is echoed in the writings of Bahâ’u’llâh, also as a prolegomenon to a doctrine of revelation:

Know thou, moreover, that the Word of God—exalted be His Glory—is higher and far superior to that which the senses can perceive, for it is sanctified from any property or substance. It transcendeth the limitations of known elements and is exalted above all the essential and recognized substances. It became manifest without any syllable or sound and is none but the Command of God which pervadeth all created things.¹³⁵

Leaving aside for the moment as to the way in which Christ acts as a prism for God’s light, Ephrem establishes God as an experiential reality as one which at the same time poses a cognitive mystery.¹³⁶ The most mature epistemological statements about God throughout mystical discourses in the Western religious traditions tend to qualify positive experience with negative theology. Thus Ephrem can sustain his paradox without lessening the intensity of either polarity:

However much, Lord, I would feel You,
it is still not You Yourself I touch.
for my mind can touch nothing of Your hiddenness:
it is just a visible, illumined, image
that I see in the symbol of You;
for all investigation into Your being is hidden.¹³⁷

In the form of praise, this is a simple statement of the epistemological limits of human finitude. Experience outstrips its own explanation. By the same token, Bahâ’u’llâh’s doctrine of the unsearchability of God is closely comparable to Ephrem’s. There are many parallels in the Bahâ’î writings to Ephrem’s argument, represented below, that the knowledge of something involves a comprehension of it, and that comprehension must be superior to

the object of knowledge itself, which is impossible when it comes to the apprehension of God and Christ:

Whoever is capable of investigating
 becomes the container of what he investigates;
 a knowledge which is capable of containing the Omniscient
 is greater than Him,
 for it has proved capable of measuring the whole of Him.

A person who investigates the Father and the Son
 is thus greater than them!
 Far be it, then, and something anathema,
 that the Father and Son should be investigated,
 while dust and ashes exalts itself!¹³⁸

Between Creator and creation yawns an ontological “chasm” (*Hymns on Faith* 69:11). Brock states that “chasm” is the same term in Syriac found in the Parable of Dives and Lazarus at Luke 16:26. The Divine Word is one the far side of the chasm, while the angelic host belong with humankind on the near side of the divide.¹³⁹

Myriads of Saints as witnesses to the Mystery of God

In Christian terms, Bahâ'u'llâh's precursor, the Bâb (d. 1850), stands as a kind of John the Baptist figure in relation to Bahâ'u'llâh. The Bâb expresses the paradox of knowing God's unknowability so: “I have known Thee by Thy making known to me that Thou art unknowable to anyone save Thyself.”¹⁴⁰ So far, there is doctrinal agreement between Bahâ'î and Syriac Christian spirituality, that God is unsearchable. Beyond surface parallelisms, this study takes a special interest in drawing “analogies between analogies.” As mentioned, the idea for this study first occurred during the author's reading of a text of Ephrem that struck a chord with a translated passage from Bahâ'u'llâh's Tablet of Divine Unity (*Lawḥ-i Tawḥîd*).¹⁴¹ To see if such a resonance was borne out, it was necessary to consult the original sources: Ephrem in Syriac, and Bahâ'u'llâh in Persian admixed with Arabic. Let us first begin with Ephrem:

Thousands thousands stand, and ten thousand thousands haste.
 The thousands and ten thousands, cannot search out the One:
 for all of them stand, in silence to serve.
 He has no heir of His Throne, save the Son Who is of Him.
 In the midst of silence is the enquiry into Him,
 when the Watchers [angels] come to search Him out.
 They attain to silence and are stayed.¹⁴²

Ten thousand is a symbolic figure for Ephrem.¹⁴³ As an exponent of ten, let us recall that in Syriac tradition as in other cultures, ten is the number of perfection. Both the numbers represented here and the scene itself recalls the Daniel's vision of the "Ancient of Days" (*ʿattîq yômîn*): "A thousand thousands [*ʿelep ʿalpîm*; LXX *chiliai chiliades*] served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand [*wʿribbô ribwân*; LXX *muriai muriades*] stood [*yʿqûmûn*; LXX *pareistê-keisan*] before him."¹⁴⁴ The idea of standing has cultic significance.¹⁴⁵

Ephrem's description of the heavenly host standing in immovable silence is thoroughly Semitic. "Standing" is, above all, steadfastness. The Christian monastic practice of standing was for the purpose of attaining transcendence.¹⁴⁶

The angelic "Watchers," later in this hymn, are said to have "seen Thee in the midst of the abyss"—a poetic description of beatific vision that can only be self-negating as well as self-affirming. There may also be an allusion here to the ancient Near Eastern motif of primeval chaos as the scene of theophany. In Bahâ'u'llâh's *Tablet to Napoleon III* (c. 1869), reference is made to the "Abyss of Eternity" (*qulzum al-baqâ'*), over which the call of God stretches.¹⁴⁷ *Qulzum* refers to the depths of the sea, and in modern usage serves as a designation for the sea, as in the Red Sea" (*baḥr al-qulzum*).

In any event, the Watchers, or angelic host, are myriad. The term "Watchers" (*ʾirê*) represents "Angels" in both Jewish and Syriac traditions. The term may have had Accadian (or Hebrew or Ugaritic) origins, though the influence of Persian divine beings has also been suggested.¹⁴⁸ If so, this favored the development of the idea of monasticism as a "*vita angelica*" on earth, according to Murray.¹⁴⁹ Despite the near access to God which they traditionally enjoy, their nearness to God is one of spiritual purity and not of epistemological knowing (i.e., not by "investigation" [*ʿuqqaba*] or "scrutiny" [*bṣata*]), save in terms of a very positive negative theology, and in terms of experience rather than knowledge. McVey's translation of *Hymns on the Nativity*

21:20 more accurately runs as follows:

A thousand thousands stood; ten thousand ten thousands ran.
Thousands and ten thousands were not able to investigate the One.
All of them in silence, therefore, stood to serve Him.
He has no consort except the Child that is from Him.
Seeking Him is in silence. When Watchers went to investigate,
They reached silence and were restrained.¹⁵⁰

The context of this passage, as McVey points out, may not have resided within the original cycle of nativity hymns, but rather in the anti-Arian context more appropriate to the *Hymns on Faith*, from which the previous six strophes were drawn, perhaps inserted by a later hand.¹⁵¹ The most pretentious Arian claim, in Ephrem's view, was not any particular line of interpretation as such, but rather the temerity to issue categorical statements about God in a way that was as epistemologically unsupportable as it was ecclesiastically divisive. Now, to adduce a metaphorical and doctrinal parallel from Bahâ'u'llâh's *Tablet of Divine Unity*:

Text:

صد هزار موسی در طور طلب بندای لن ترانی منصعق

و صد هزار روح القدس در سماء قرب از اصغاء کلمه لن تعرفنی مضطرب

Transliteration:

şad hazār mūsā dar tūr-i ṭalab lan tarānī munṣa'iq
va şad hazār ruh al-quddūs dar samā-i qurb az iṣḡā' kalimih-yi lan ta'rifānī
muzṭarīb

Translation (by Shoghi Effendi):

Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, "Thou shalt never behold Me!"; whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, "Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!"¹⁵²

This passage is Persian in syntax but is really Persian intermixed with Arabic. The translator has, in effect, distributed God's interdiction (literally, "Thou shall not know Me!) to both sets of prophetic figures: *viz.*, the myriad (literally, one hundred thousand) Mosaic figures, and the equally superlative number of Christ-like figures (literally, one hundred thousand figures of "the Holy Spirit." Presumably personified here is Jesus, by force of parallel and in mind perhaps the Qur'ânic epithet for Jesus as the "Spirit". Theodoret of Cyrrhus, a native Syrian, refers to Christ as "the All-Holy Spirit".¹⁵³

The original supports "stand dismayed" (*muzṭarīb*) without the image of standing. It appears that the translator, Shoghi Effendi, has in effect capitalized on the allusive possibilities of "standing" as it recalls the vision of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 (Bahâ'u'llâh identified himself with this figure). The words "upon their heavenly thrones," with poetic licence perhaps for its resonance with prophetic Throne-Vision imagery, is supplied for, literally, "in the heaven (sky) of nearness." On comparative grounds, the reader will be struck by the seemingly hyperbolic use of superlative numbers, though, in all fairness to Ephrem and Bahâ'u'llâh, hyperbole is, in this context, understatement.

It is important to note context. The entry on *Lawḥ-i Tawḥîd* in Ishrâq-Khavarî's catalogue of Tablets of Bahâ'u'llâh unfortunately discloses nothing pertaining to its circumstances of revelation.¹⁵⁴ From internal evidence, however, Bahâ'u'llâh's address to the Bâbîs discloses a specific audience. This Tablet serves as a kind of ideological circumlocution. From this Tablet and other writings, Bâbîs were led to embrace Bahâ'u'llâh's revelation.

In the passage quoted, Taherzadeh sees a reference to the "World of Divinity" (*'âlam-i hâhût*), the inaccessible realm of the Divine Essence.¹⁵⁵ This is the realm of divine Ipseity (*huwiyya*, from *huwa*, "He is.")¹⁵⁶ Later in this Tablet, Bahâ'u'llâh speaks of human limitations, and in so doing, has recourse to several analogies. For instance, it could be supposed that the most important organ of sense perception—the eye—has a blindness greater than its blind spot. Bahâ'u'llâh states the bald fact that, unaided, it is impossible for the eye to behold itself. He then expresses the paradox: "How can I claim to have known Thee, when the entire creation is bewildered by Thy mystery, and how can I confess not to have known Thee, when, lo, the whole universe proclaimeth Thy Presence and testifieth to Thy truth?"¹⁵⁷ Bahâ'u'llâh, according to Cole,

“paradoxically relates personally to a God Who is not a person.”¹⁵⁸ Personhood is a human construct, arising out of a human condition. No doubt the presence of God is experienced in profoundly personal terms by the mystic. God may define the experience, but the experience does not define God.

But the doctrine of God’s mystery is really the point of departure for a doctrine of revelation, and in the remainder of the Tablet, which is untranslated, Bahâ’u’llâh expounds on the primacy of the Manifestations of God.

The metaphor of myriads of saints bearing witness to the mystery of God is striking and dramatic. It expresses in personal rather than in philosophical terms the problem of the hidden God. Bahâ’u’llâh’s use of the metaphor is conceptually bolder, as his metaphor is drawn from farther up the celestial hierarchy, in which figures comparable to Moses and Jesus know more profoundly than any mortal the unknowability of God. In Christian usage, Ephrem is not alone in the use of this metaphor. For Gregory of Nazianzus in his *Theological Orations*, God is unknowable not only to the pious laity but to the ancient worthies as well, such as Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Elijah, Manoaah, Ezekiel, Isaiah and Peter.¹⁵⁹

This brings us now to a discussion of Bahâ’î and Syriac metaphors of the relationship of theophany to creation. Bahâ’î and Syriac Christian doctrines of theophanology appear to have certain affinities of thought and description. Over incarnation and its soteriological corollary, theosis, however, there will be considerable differences, which will require explanation. Following Beggi-ani’s thematic progression, our discussion of revelation will be preceded by some considerations on Creation and Sin.

Concept II. Creation and Sin

Metaphor: The Earth of the Heart

Bahâ’î and Syriac Christian Anthropology

Christianity is at heart a message of salvation, centred on Jesus, whose very name means “Savior.” At the root of the Christological debates in the fourth century lay the fundamental issue of the relation between body and soul.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, in Christian consciousness, forgiveness of sins and the death of Christ and his victory over death are interrelated. In the theology of

the Greek-speaking Church, Christ as Redeemer liberated us not so much from guilt as from our mortality, our “sickness unto death.” Though the Latin West began to move away from the doctrine of *theosis*¹⁶¹ (deification) prevalent in the Greek East, no explicit doctrine of reconciliation was settled upon in the period of the early Church. Winslow rightly points out the fact that “there was no such thing, among the Fathers, as *soteriological* orthodoxy.”¹⁶² There is one point of departure from which all Christian theories of redemption proceed: the sinful human plight. El-Khoury has sought to contextualize Ephrem’s anthropology within the School of Antioch.¹⁶³

Originally, creation did get off to a good start. Beggiani draws attention to several Syriac texts in which Adam is fashioned in the image of God. Among various interpretations, Ephrem considers free-will to be the endowment by which it could be said that Adam was fashioned in the image of God.¹⁶⁴ Free-will is potentially God-like. It is also liable to sin. Adam sinned. This was not due to a defect in his nature, but rather to a fateful choice. That choice had consequences for the rest of humanity. As the salvation-peak of history, Christ came to redeem us from this plight. Probably Theodoret of Cyrrhus represents the Syriac view in maintaining that sin was passed on from generation to generation, but not by procreation.¹⁶⁵

Bahâ’î theology will not allow this. Justice cannot brook the concept that innocent children are born into sin. The Bahâ’î position on the Fall is perhaps akin to that of the British monk Pelagius, whom Augustine so bitterly opposed.¹⁶⁶ Even Pelagianism might have had a Syrian origin, as its original doctrine was said to have been brought to Rome by a certain Rufinus of Syria.¹⁶⁷ Some of the teachings of Rufinus of Syria and the Briton Pelagius would seem perfectly logical to a Bahâ’î.¹⁶⁸

Working the Earth of the Heart¹⁶⁹

We learn that there were Christians who, under Syriac Christian influence, thought it possible to dwell in the Kingdom of God while here on earth. Such was the case with Adelphius of Edessa, a disciple of Syrian monk Julian Saba.¹⁷⁰ To be a “Kingdom-dweller”, as it were, presumes some ability to perceive the presence of something invisible to the naked eye. What kind of senses provide the instrumentality for such perception?

Syriac Christian tradition speaks of internal senses. The *Book of Ascents* (*Liber Graduum*) speaks of “organs of the soul” (*hadāmē d-napšā*) and “senses of the soul” (*regšeyh d-napšā*), named as inner eyes, ears, and understanding. Ephrem, in *Hymns on Faith* 4:6, refers to the “inner senses of thoughts” in contradistinction to bodily senses.¹⁷¹ “Faith,” as described by Ephrem, serves as “a second soul” which, with love and wisdom, permits one to be joined (*metmzeg*) to divinity and to be reformed in its image.¹⁷²

A tree which holds back	its bud must wither
when the breeze brings birthpangs	for tender buds.
As from the tree's green womb	it makes the fruit sprout,
so may my faith	likewise flourish!

The tender seed bursts	through the covering of the earth,
promising the ear of corn	so full of symbols.
So faith, whose bosom	is full of good fruits
Is an ear of corn	full of praise.

Accursed farmer,	enslaved is his will;
hard yoke he drags,	wilderness he ploughs.
In place of wheat	brambles he sows,
mastered as he is	by the goad of sin. ¹⁷³

Wheat and trees variously represent people.¹⁷⁴ Specific plants and trees come to represent certain kinds of people. Cypress, myrtle and flowers symbolize ascetics, while the “speech-endowed box” and “Christian cedars” represent the faithful in general.¹⁷⁵ This kind of anthropological symbolism of course has many Biblical precedents.¹⁷⁶ “Warmth,” writes Ephrem, “awakens the womb of the silent earth, as the Holy Spirit [awakens] Holy Church.”¹⁷⁷ In one passage, Ephrem portrays the Church as a field, which addresses Christ as the “Farmer” who tends the earth of the heart:

My Farmer, plough my lands,
 and again and a third time, Lord!
 just as by a threefold action
 thou has baptized and brought to life
 the soil of our souls,

the church of our spirits!¹⁷⁸

Bahâ'u'llâh also employs agrarian imagery, but without the image of plowing, which had come to have some erotic connotations in the Qur'ân.¹⁷⁹ A sampling of recurrent imagery of the landscape of the heart will demonstrate the same kind of metaphoric correspondences. After counselling discretion in one's speech, Bahâ'u'llâh concludes: "*Wherefore sow the seeds of wisdom and knowledge in the pure soil of the heart, and keep them hidden, till the hyacinths of divine wisdom spring from the heart and not from mire and clay.*"¹⁸⁰ And further: "*Sow the seeds of My divine wisdom in the pure soil of thy heart, and water them with the water of certitude, that the hyacinths of My knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of thy heart.*"¹⁸¹ This is a stock metaphor in Bahâ'u'llâh's repertoire and is found recurrently throughout his writings,¹⁸² of which one final example should suffice to illustrate:

Ye are the saplings which the hand of Loving-kindness hath planted in the soil of mercy, and which the showers of bounty have made to flourish. He hath protected you from the mighty winds of misbelief, and the tempestuous gales of impiety, and nurtured you with the hands of His loving providence. Now is the time for you to put forth your leaves, and yield your fruit. The fruits of the tree of man have ever been and are goodly deeds and a praiseworthy character. Withhold not these fruits from the heedless. If they be accepted, your end is attained, and the purpose of life achieved. If not, leave them in their pastime of vain disputes. Strive, O people of God, that haply the hearts of the divers kindreds of the earth may, through the waters of your forbearance and loving-kindness, be cleansed and sanctified from animosity and hatred, and be made worthy and befitting recipients of the splendors of the Sun of Truth.¹⁸³

This is an authentic parallel to Ephrem, since examples from both writers are free of sacramental associations. Such is not the case with some of Ephrem's imagery of the Vineyard, which is (associatively if not explicitly) both sacramental and ecclesiastical.¹⁸⁴ So far, we have seen, restrictively isolated cases of both doctrinal and ethical parallels between Syriac Christianity and the Bahâ'î Faith, expressed in parallel imagery. The absence of sacramental imagery in the Bahâ'î writings reflects one difference of fundamental importance between the two religious systems: the Bahâ'î Faith does not hold to a sacramental

world view.¹⁸⁵ This difference in soteriology will become increasingly apparent.

Concept III. Revelation **Metaphor: The Sun and Its Light**

God and the Universe

Bahâ'î and Syriac Christian doctrines of revelation are part and parcel of a theology of presence, the relation between the created and the uncreated. Revelation may be thought of as God crossing the ontological chasm through ambassadorial means. For Ephrem, God is revealed in two modes: in Nature (*kyana*) and in Scripture (*ktaba*). Beyond this, a cultic interpretation of Christianity came to predominate Ephrem's thinking. Divinity was communicated and came to be experienced through the "mysteries" or sacraments, constituting the soteriologically-efficacious presence of God.¹⁸⁶ The link of sacramentality to christological issues is absolutely basic to Ephrem.

God Revealed in Christ and Bahâ'u'llâh

Bahâ'î and Syriac Christian doctrines of the mystery of God have served as a points of departure for theologies of revelation. Doctrines of God's presence counterbalance acknowledgements of God's epistemological absence. Though God is in some sense revealed, the revelation itself is a veil, the light reveals the orb of the sun but conceals its core. Ephrem refers to Christ as "Lord of the servants," who is himself unfathomable. The Watchers "sought You in heaven; they saw you in the abyss."¹⁸⁷ Now it is God's Incarnation being contemplated. In a sense, God may be "seen" (revealed) in the form of Christ, in the "abyss" of creation.

Nor is the mystery of God is diminished in Christ. The mystery is simply brought more intimately into the realm of human experience. Hence, God's unfathomability is transferred to Christ:

You are utterly a wonder...

Investigation is not able to stretch it[self] to reach You.

Whenever it stretches out to reach [You], it is cut off and falls short.

It is too short for Your mountain. Faith [reaches] You—
And love and prayer.¹⁸⁸

“Prayer,” according to an anonymous Christian manuscript in the British Museum, “conversation and encounter with God.”¹⁸⁹ Ephrem writes: “Whereunto art Thou like? Let thy stillness speak to one that hears; with silent mouth speak with us; for whoso hears the stammerings of Thy silence, to him thy type utters its silent cry concerning our Redeemer.”¹⁹⁰

Metaphor and Reality

In Syriac Christology, Christ’s Sonship goes far beyond adoptive, elective, or other ideal relationships with God. Ephrem describes Christ as “the Son of the Hidden One, as He emerged into revelation.”¹⁹¹ This is taken literally. Ephrem, the master of metaphor, knows the difference between metaphor and reality, and is well aware of the Christological consequences of both readings: Christ is truly God’s Son, and for this reason God as “Father” is no metaphor but a reality: “And if His name ‘Father’ were a metaphor—which God forbid!—the names which go with it (*šmh*² by^c *zugh*) will lose their force under dispute.”¹⁹²

For Ephrem, there are two classes of names (*šmaha*) or “appellations” (*kunnaye*) in scripture, as stipulated in *Hymns Against Heretics* 36:9: (1) divine attributes, or “literal reality” (*šrrh dptgm*²); and (2) metaphors, or “likenesses of the Creator” (*dmwt² dbrwy²*). The former are “perfect and accurate” while the latter are “putative and passing” (*Hymns on Faith* 44:2).¹⁹³ As Brock translates:

God has names that are perfect and exact,
and He has names that are borrowed and transient;
these latter He quickly puts on and takes off.¹⁹⁴

Metaphors also have their place in Ephrem’s poetic liturgy. In *Hymns on the Nativity* 21:9, another section of which has been discussed at length earlier in this paper, Ephrem describes Christ with four successive epithets:

CHRIST

Reconciling Peace
Gladdening Flash
Powerful Leaven
Patient One¹⁹⁵

These are but few of many appellatives for Christ found throughout the hymns of Ephrem, constituting what dogmatics has come to refer to as “Title Christology”. In Bahâ’u’llâh’s *Tablet of Divine Unity*, compared with Ephrem in relation to the hiddenness of God, Bahâ’u’llâh coins four epithets for the Manifestation of God:

MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD *[SC. CHRIST AND BAHÂ’U’LLÂH]*

Primal Mirror	<i>[M ir‘ât-i avaliiyyih]</i>
Ancient Ornament	<i>[Tarâz-i qadamiyyih]</i>
Hidden Unveiling	<i>[Mvîh-yi ghaybiyyih]</i>
Primal Word	<i>[Kalîmih-yi tâmmih]</i> ¹⁹⁶

Though Ephrem and Bahâ’u’llâh each draw from a many-hued palate of descriptive appellatives for the Savior-figure, only a few titles emerge as doctrinally definitive, becoming, as it were, what dogmatics has come to refer to a “referential Christology”.

So far, both God and Christ have been presented as mysteries beyond the reach of human ken. As if to reinforce such a notion in practical terms, Ephrem suggests that the soul is itself a mystery which man is powerless to unravel:

If, then, our knowledge cannot even achieve a knowledge of itself,
 how does it dare investigate the birth of Him who knows all things?
 How can the servant, who does not properly know himself,
 pry into the nature of his Maker?¹⁹⁷

Again, this statement has Arianism in mind. From a fourth-century Syriac Christian perspective, the target could just as easily have been Greek philo-

sophical theology. To resume, the unknowability of God apart, it is Ephrem's Christ who most fully reveals the mystery of God:

Who, Lord, can gaze on your hiddenness
Which has come to revelation? Yes, Your obscurity
has come to manifestation and notification;
Your concealed Being
has come out into the open...¹⁹⁸

There is fundamental agreement between Ephrem and Bahâ'u'llâh on the mystery of God and the extension of that mystery in the person of God's revealer. The act of revelation is never full disclosure. The sun is both revealed and concealed by the radiation of its light. The mystery is revealed to be a mystery. As Bahâ'u'llâh writes:

Know thou that ... the Manifestation [Prophet] is ... the Mystery of Oneness, ... the Eternal Essence and the Unknowable Reality... Therefore, one can never realize that He hath appeared ... from any of the substances mentioned by the tongues of philosophers... He is a sea upon which no one can sail, inasmuch as all ... in heaven and earth is created by His Word...¹⁹⁹

Bahâ'u'llâh's theophanology (or doctrine of the "Manifestation (*al-zuhûr*) of God"), if compared with traditional Christology, carefully avoids the philosophical entrapments of ontology by distancing the doctrine from all classical categories of substance. Parallel with Ephrem and with Christianity in general is a Bahâ'î Logos doctrine, with similar ideological contours at a cosmic level. The Bahâ'î ideology diverges from its Christian counterpart the closer the hypostasis comes to earth, though the Virgin Birth is, in contradistinction to Islam, accepted in Bahâ'î doctrine. Hence:

The first Word of the Almighty is sometimes called the Water of Life, for it quickens the dead souls in the desert of ignorance with the spring of intelligence. Sometimes it is called the First Emanation which appears from the Sun of Wisdom, and when it began to shine ... then phenomena stepped into the arena of existence.²⁰⁰

Primal Cause versus Trinity

Ephrem lived at a time when the Church felt it imperative to define what it held to be true over against the threats of what it deemed untrue. In a pagan and Gnostic environment, it was necessary to defend the unity of God against, among others, the Marcionites, Bardaisanites, and Manichaeans.²⁰¹ It would then become necessary to define the unity of the Trinity. Only with the First Council of Constantinople (381) had a formula crystallized which confirmed the identity in nature between the Holy Spirit, and the Father and the Son. The Spirit emerged as a divine Person, the agent of man's sanctification. Špidlík states: "such development can be seen, for example, in the works of Ephrem. In such early writings as *De paradiso* and the *Sermones de fide* the person of the Holy Spirit appears very little. It is only in the hymns *De fide* that an ode is addressed to him."²⁰² Considering that the Council of Constantinople postdates Ephrem by seven or eight years, Špidlík has committed a slight anachronism, but his point is well-taken. Ephrem's own view of the Spirit appears to have reflected a development synchronous with that of the Church in its discussions leading up to the First Council of Constantinople.

The unity of the Father, the unity of the Son with the Father, and the unity of the Trinity, the generation and procession of one from the other, the rôle of each in effecting salvation and sanctification, are all interrelated questions that constitute the problematics of any systematic theology. For the early Church, resolution of certain of these issues was seen as imperative for ecclesiastical reasons. Arianism alone, which had precipitated the Christological controversies of the fourth century, had irreparably split Church and Empire and undermined its advances against paganism.

Cooke points out that the formula of Chalcedon, which constituted *the* normative text for all future orthodox Christology, "never became familiar to Christians through liturgy."²⁰³ At the same time, as Pelikan observes, "the trinitarian developments had not really prepared the church for the problematics of the christological issue."²⁰⁴ Christology and Trinitarian doctrine are so interrelated that a formulation of one can easily impact on the other. A major difficulty in any patristic formulation of the Trinity is the concept of "Primal Cause". Gregory of Nazianzus is a case in point. In attempting to defend the

doctrine of the Trinity from the charge of tritheism, the Cappadocian Father wrote: “But when we look at the three in whom the Godhead exists, who derive their timeless and equally glorious being from the primal cause, we have three objects of worship.”²⁰⁵ On this statement, Norris comments:

One difficulty for any Trinitarian theology that uses the concept of a “primal cause” is the placement of that cause within the scheme. The conundrum seems impossible to solve. If the primal cause is the Father, then the Father is different from the Son and the Spirit. But if that cause is outside or before the three, then part of the definition of God does not reside within the three. No matter which approach Gregory chooses, a puzzle remains. ... It is a Biblical puzzle that remains unsolved.²⁰⁶

In Eastern Christianity, the priority of the Father was a common counter to the charge of tritheism. Much of the Eastern Christian tradition in fact—the Cappadocian Fathers, Pseudo-Dionysius and John of Damascus—affirms that the Father is the “cause” (*aitia* / αἰτία) and originating “principle” (*archē* / ἀρχή).²⁰⁷ Ephrem steers clear of the problem of the Primal Cause, but Bahâ’u’llâh affirms it. In his discourse on philosophy, the *Tablet of Wisdom*, Bahâ’u’llâh writes:

When the eyes of the people of the East were captivated by the arts and wonders of the West, they roved distraught in the wilderness of material causes, oblivious of the One who is the Causer of Causes, and the Sustainer thereof, while such men as were the source and the wellspring of Wisdom never denied the moving Impulse behind these causes, nor the Creator or the Origin thereof.²⁰⁸

The doctrine of a Primal Cause serves to reinforce Bahâ’î doctrine,²⁰⁹ while the same concept weakens the logical structures of the Trinity for reasons spelled out by Norris. We now proceed to the Trinity, approaching the heart of Christian belief.

Ephrem's Use of Solar Imagery for the Trinity

While not at pains to reconcile the doctrine of the Trinity with philosophy, Ephrem took care to render the doctrine acceptable to reason through recourse to analogy. The analogy does not begin to exhaust the mystery of the Trinity, however, as Ephrem points out:

Take as symbols	of the Father the sun
of the Son the light,	and of the Holy Spirit
the warmth.	

Being one	yet therein is to be seen
a trinity;	who can explain
what lies beyond comprehension?	

The one is multiple:	the one consists of three,
and the three constitute one	a great astonishment
a manifest wonder.	

The sun is distinct	from its radiance,
yet mingled with it,	for its radiance
is also the sun.	

Yet none speak	of two suns,
though its radiance	is also a sun
to those down below.	

Nor do we speak	of two Gods
our Lord	being also God
over creation. ²¹⁰	

Though this is not the entire hymn, it is evident that the first two Persons of the Trinity are, at this developmental stage of the doctrine, primary for Ephrem. The Holy Spirit as the third Person does not really come into her own for Ephrem until the last decade of his life in Edessa, at which time Ephrem's church was reeling from the Arian crisis.

The Bahâ'î writings clearly take issue with Trinitarianism; this is inherited from Islam. There are likewise many instances when Bahâ'u'llâh draws on solar imagery for didactic purposes. But there is one notable effort, on the part of Bahâ'u'llâh's eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahâ, to accommodate the doctrine with appeal to the very same metaphor, albeit in a subordinationist sense, in which procession of the Son is from God and that of the Spirit from the Son:

But as to the question of the Trinity, know, O advancer unto God, that in each one of the cycles wherein the Lights have shone forth upon the horizons and the Forgiving Lord hath revealed Himself on Mount Paran or Mount Sinai, or Mount Seir, there are necessarily three things: The Giver of the Grace, and the Grace, and the Recipient of the Grace; the Source of the Effulgence, and the Effulgence, and the Recipient of the Effulgence; the Illuminator, and the Illumination, and the Illuminated. Look at the Mosaic cycle: The Lord, and Moses, and the Fire; and the Messianic cycle: The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost the Intermediary; and in the Mohammedan cycle: The Lord, the Apostle [or Messenger, Muḥammad], and Gabriel.

Look at the sun and its rays and the heat which results from its rays: the rays and the heat are but two effects of the sun, but inseparable from it; yet the sun is one in its essence, unique in its real identity, single in its attributes, neither is it possible that anything should resemble it. Such is the essence of the Truth concerning the Unity, the real doctrine of the Singularity, the undiluted reality as to the [Divine] Sanctity.²¹¹

This is a real rapprochement with the doctrine of the Trinity, drawing on a common metaphor. But the difference is still essential. Commonality of metaphor is no guarantor of conceptual resonance.

Concept IV. The Person of the Savior Transposable Metaphor: The Mariner

Bahâ'u'llâh on the Person of Christ

In a Tablet addressed to German Templar leader Georg David Hardegg some time prior to July 1872, Bahâ'u'llâh remarks on the Person of Christ, relative to the other great spiritual figures of history, with whom theologies of pluralism have only recently attempted to come to terms:

As for what you mentioned, that a certain person supposed that there are no differences between us with regard to the Spirit [Jesus]: This is the truth, inasmuch as the Spirit (*al-ruh*) is sanctified from being overwhelmed by differences, or encompassed by symbolic expressions. He, verily, is the Light of Oneness (*nûr al-ahadiyya*) among mankind, and the Sign of the Ancient (*âyat al-qidam*) among the peoples. He who turneth unto Him [Jesus] hath turned unto He [God] Who sent Him... He hath ever been what He was and will ever remain the same...; only the effulgence of His Epiphany in the Mirrors varies on account of Their different forms and colours.²¹²

It may be said here that, from Bahâ'u'llâh's perspective, Christ's greatness and uniqueness is not diminished by the confession that God has sent other great spiritual teachers. The closest counterpart to in Ephrem's hymns to Bahâ'u'llâh's doctrine of prophetic unity is the sentiment:

Look on the prophets and the apostles,
how like they are to each other!²¹³

Ephrem could not have been expected to have been a pluralist.

The Metaphor of Christ as Mariner

One of the important metaphors for Christ in early Syriac Christianity was that of a mariner. The Manichaean *Pslams*, for instance, refer to Christ as "Helmsman that is not drunken."²¹⁴ The first example of Ephrem's use of Mariner as a metaphor for Christ is supplicatory. In a lamentation uttered by the city of Nisibis,²¹⁵ personified by the poet as suffering under Persian siege in 350 A.D. when the Persian king Shapur II damned the local river in order to flood the outskirts of the town, Christ is invoked as "Helmsman" of the Ark of the Church:

All kinds of storms trouble me...

The Flood bore the Ark,
while me the river threatens.
O Helmsman of the Ark,
be my pilot on dry land;

You rested the Ark on the haven of a mountain,
give rest to me too in the haven of my walls.²¹⁶

The following picture of Christ as a Mariner (*mallāhâ*) is drawn from a hymn in which each stanza depicts Christ in a different symbolic image:

O Master Mariner, who hast conquered the raging sea,
thy glorious wood is a sign [or, 'has come'];
it has become the oar of salvation.
The wind of mercy blew, the ship set out on its course, away from
the raging sea to the haven of peace.
Blessed is he who has become the mariner of his own soul
and has preserved and unloaded his treasure!²¹⁷

This is evidently an allusion to Mark 6:45–52 and parallels. The harbor motif (i.e. "haven of peace") is well-attested in the Syriac tradition.²¹⁸ Widengren has shown the Mesopotamian antecedents to the Christian Syriac and Manichaean use of this imagery.²¹⁹ Ephrem's use of nautical imagery is not restricted

has shown, and Ephrem's attention to the Holy Spirit shows this hymn to have been written late in Ephrem's life, if Špidlík's assessment is correct. Kronholm renders (*mallāhâ*) as "Pilot" with *spnh* as a synonym likewise translatable as "Mariner." Greer has devoted part of a study to the important picture of Christ as Mariner.²²¹ This picture of Christ appears elsewhere in Ephrem, such as in his *Memre* (poetical homilies) on *Nicomedia* 5:11, where Christ is described as "the Pilot of that ark" (*mlḥh dhy kwyḏ*).²²²

Bahâ'u'llâh could be meaningfully transposed into this metaphor soteriologically without any real difficulty, with one important reservation: Bahâ'u'llâh does not comparably play a sacramental rôle. The transposability of Christ placed within a Bahâ'î writing remains to be seen.

Bahâ'u'llâh as Mariner

What follows is the first part of a short poetic work of Bahâ'u'llâh known as the Tablet of the Holy Mariner (*Lawḥ-i Mallâḥ al-Quds*) composed in late March 1863. The utility of this image for comparative purposes is optimized by the fact that the Arabic *mallâḥ* is virtually the exact counterpart to *mallāhâ* in Syriac. The Holy Mariner is Bahâ'u'llâh himself. God addresses the Mariner, commanding him to embark on a voyage, to fulfill his destiny. The significance of God's bidding is this: *The Tablet of the Holy Mariner* was written on the eve of Bahâ'u'llâh's imminent assumption of leadership of the Bâbî community in the face of almost certain opposition by certain factions. The Ark represents the religion of Bahâ'u'llâh and what is referred to in Bahâ'î terminology as the Covenant. The dwellers within the Ark are the faithful believers. In the passage excerpted below, God bids the Mariner—the captain of the Ark of salvation—to embark on his voyage in the face of impending adversity:

He is the Gracious, the Well-Beloved!

Refrain: *Glorified be my Lord the All-Glorious!*

O HOLY MARINER!

Bid thine ark of eternity appear before the Celestial Concourse,
Launch it upon the ancient sea, in His Name, the Most Wondrous,
And let the angelic spirits enter, in the Name of God, the Most High.

Concept V. Incarnation and Immortality

Metaphors: Purple on Emperors and the Gold Ring

Not every Syriac Christian theologian could accept enforced formulae of faith. For instance, an unnamed Nestorian (a Christian holding to two persons/*prosopa* Christology in which divine and human indwell in Christ) opponent of Philoxenus (d. 523) had maintained:

Just as a king puts on purple clothes which remain in their own hypostasis, outside the hypostasis of the king, so did God put on the different hypostasis of a man who served him as his purple robes.^{22A}

For Philoxenus' Nestorian, there is more than one robe. If the plurality of robes had any significance, perhaps they represented successive prophets in the course of salvation history. In this kind of imagery, which is static rather than dynamic, the king is unaffected by the royal vestment; the robe simply renders God "visible." But there is one crucial distinction to which proponents of the Incarnation would surely have objected: God does not become the robe as the Word became flesh. The robe is not necessarily a docetic image when it comes to Jesus; it is a docetic image with respect to the Incarnation. Though Ephrem himself uses the metaphor of the robe, he would doubtless have had problems with the idea of disparate hypostases. But the problem was never that easy to solve. Even the Nicene Creed says nothing about the mode of union of God in Christ.

To understand Ephrem's doctrine of Incarnation, intimately bound up as it is with his soteriology, we must first review the human predicament, as it is portrayed in primordial terms. Again, robes figure prominently in the picture. The robe of immortality is a key element in this drama. Apparently, the robe of light transforms its wearer. It is no mere ornament. It is not worn for its symbolic form; it is worn in order to transform its wearer. Below is a synopsis of salvation history, presented as an eschatological drama in Four Acts:

The Robe: A Drama in Four Parts

1) *Primordial Robes of Glory*: In Paradise, Adam and Eve were clothed in “Robes of Glory” or “Robes of Light.” The Jewish *Midrash Rabba on Genesis*, we learn that Rabbi Meir is reputed to have had in his possession a Hebrew manuscript of the Pentateuch, which at Gen. 3:21 read not “garments of skin” but “garments of light”; in the targumic tradition, the traditional “garments of skin” is rendered a “clothing of glory.”²²⁵ This possibility is rendered all the more plausible (for the reader) given the close reading of “light” (*ʿwr*) over against the received reading of “skin” (*cwr*).

2) *Disrobed in disgrace*: After the Fall, Adam and Eve were stripped of their “robes of glory/light.”

3) *Christ places Robe in Jordan*: God “puts on Adam” or “a body” in order to “re clothe mankind in the robe of glory.” In the course of his descent into the waters of the Jordan at baptism, Christ deposits the “robe of glory/light” into the water, sanctifying for all time all baptismal water.

(4) *Robe regained at Baptism*: The invocation of the Holy Spirit at baptism consecrates the baptismal font, effectively transforming the individual font into the waters of the Jordan in sacred time and space. The “robe of glory” which Adam lost in the Fall is recovered by the Christian at baptism.²²⁶

Brock has linked this robe tradition back to its Near Eastern roots.²²⁷ The garment of light, as Brock also points out, has a parallel in Zoroastrianism.²²⁸

The Incarnation According to Ephrem

One cannot escape the impression that death represented the greatest concern for Christians in Syria in the fourth century. The drama of salvation from start to finish has as its theme the contest with death. The story of the Fall suspended disbelief; once accepted, the plot was set. Adam was the fallen god; God descended from heaven, too, but through a different act of free will. Jesus, bearing the robe of immortality, was immersed in the River Jordan. The water multiplied in countless baptisms for centuries. At least for this part of the scenario, the conferral of immortality did not require the death and resurrection of Christ!

An elaborate mechanism was constructed for conferral of immortality. The wine of the Eucharist was the elixir, crucifixion of Christ its cauldron, the antidote against death concocted and administered by a Physician who ultimately did heal himself, thereby providing the cure for others. The Incarnation was the key element.

Bahâ'u'llâh on Incarnation and Immortality

To be sure, Bahâ'u'llâh, like Ephrem, is fond of robe imagery. Numerous examples are to be found, but in the interests of affording the closest parallel to Ephrem possible, the following text (from an unpublished *Tablet to Jnâb-i Muḥammad*) will suffice to illustrate Bahâ'u'llâh's frequent recourse to clothing imagery:

All praise and glory be to God Who, through the power of His might, hath delivered His creation from the nakedness of non-existence, and clothed it with the mantle of life. From among all created things He hath singled out for His special favor the pure, gem-like reality of man, and invested it with a unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory. This twofold distinction conferred upon him hath cleansed away from his heart the rust of every vain desire, and made him worthy of the vesture with which his Creator hath deigned to clothe him. It hath served to rescue his soul from the wretchedness of ignorance.

This robe with which the body and soul of man hath been adorned very foundation of his well-being and development. Oh, how blessed the day when, aided by the grace and might of the one true God, man will have freed himself from the bondage and corruption of the world and all that is therein, and will have attained unto the true and abiding rest beneath the shadow of the Tree of Knowledge.²²⁹

All of this imagery is recognizable and meaningful within the Syriac Christian tradition. Allusions to Eden are unmistakable, and references to garments of immortality are present. But, unlike Ephrem, Bahâ'u'llâh states that man has already been invested with the robe of immortality. Bahâ'î soteriology thus concerns itself with other matters entirely:

O SON OF MAN!

Thou art My dominion and My dominion perisheth not, wherefore fearest thou thy perishing? Thou art My light and My light shall never be extinguished, why dost thou dread extinction? Thou art My glory and My glory fadeth not; thou art My robe and My robe shall never be outworn. Abide then in thy love for Me, that thou mayest find Me in the realm of glory.²³⁰

If immortality is a given in Bahâ'î anthropology, what then is Bahâ'î salvation? There are numerous pronouncements on this question in the Bahâ'î writings. To sustain the metaphorical comparisons already drawn, a soteriological formula involving enrobement is to the point. In the same *Tablet to Inâb-i Muḥammad* cited above, Bahâ'u'llâh writes:

And now concerning thy question regarding the nature of religion. Know that they who are truly wise have likened the world unto the human temple. As the body of man needeth a garment to clothe it, so the body of mankind must needs be adorned with the mantle of justice and wisdom. Its robe is the Revelation vouchsafed unto it by God. Whenever this robe hath fulfilled its purpose, the Almighty will assuredly renew it.²³¹

Whatever the imagery, Bahâ'u'llâh explicitly rejects Incarnation: "*Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men.*"²³² There is no need for an Incarnation as the reality of man is already immortal. In place of this doctrine, Bahâ'u'llâh has developed a theophanology of "Manifestation":

To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted above every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress ... No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness ...²³³

While both Bahâ'î and Syriac Christian doctrines of revelation proceed from the idea of the unapproachable mystery of God, in Ephrem a transforma-