

Leaving the Bahá'í Faith

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1. Introduction

A year ago today, I submitted my dissertation. I realized that the moment marked the end not only of one era in my life, but two: alongside the end of my long quest to earn a doctorate also came the end of my time as a member of the Bahá'í Faith.

Doubt and discontent with the Faith had been building within me for a while, like water dripping into a jar. My dissertation was not the start of it; what the writing process did was permit me to trust my own perspective, and create a safe space inside of myself in which I could begin uncovering my true beliefs. Although my official research topic was philosophy of journalism, many of the issues that I was tackling actually went to the very core of how we orient ourselves in the universe. For example, when articulating the difference between propaganda and journalism, I found myself arguing that the universes they present are completely different: propaganda presents a hostile cosmos in which our existence itself is ill and truth is determined by will, whereas journalism has faith that, whatever the indifference and tragedy of existence, there are ultimately law-like principles that govern it — a divinity that suffuses it — and even if we can never fully grasp those principles, we are supposed to exist, and we are home. A metaphysics of sorts began to appear by the time I submitted my dissertation, one that emerged from, and spoke to, the depths of my soul.

Once the jar was full, I decided to wait a year before making a firm decision whether to stay or leave. Initially, my idea was to use the Bahá'í concept of a “year of patience”, designed for a marital separation but applied instead to the Faith, so as to be absolutely sure departure was what I wanted and needed. However, that did not last long, for I could feel in my bones that my membership was truly done. So, I ended up spending most of this year of patience instead reflecting on what the Bahá'í Faith has meant for me, and which elements of it I want to cherish, hold onto, move on from, or reject.

I also spent this year cultivating, appropriately enough, patience. I found a mix of disappointment and rage among many former Bahá'ís, and I immediately understood that while such feelings have their place, I did not want to be overcome by them and forget all the good that the Faith has done for me, and all the good it can still do for others. Consequently, while I have come to have disagreements with the Faith, the essences of which I will try to lay out here — and not only doubts and disagreements, but I must admit, also concerns — I still consider myself a friend of the Bahá'ís.

So, this essay will be critical, but not condemnatory. The difference may sometimes be difficult to discern because I will also try to be forceful and forthright with my criticisms. My actual feelings are not adversarial, but a mix of mourning and hope. Mourning for a religion that once meant so much to me, but which I have discovered is nowhere near as true as it wants to be — which is not to say it is utterly false, but that it simply falls short of its own self-image, and even more tragically, its own scriptures prevent it from being able to reckon with itself and grow. Yet, hopeful both for myself and for the Faith — myself in that I have come to feel deeply rooted in my own being, and for a religion that, at its best, can be courageous and intrepid. The Faith has an incredible track record of overcoming external obstacles; time will tell whether it can overcome its internal obstacles, and while I doubt that it can for reasons I explain below, I would still not be so foolish as to bet against the Bahá'ís.

2. If you are finding out about this just now...

Before continuing, I need to both give a warning and offer an apology. First, the warning: this essay is really intended for an audience who are acquainted with the Bahá'í Faith, not only theoretically, but our community life, culture, ideas, priorities and practices. That being said, I recognize that people curious in the Faith, perhaps even considering to join it, may come across this essay. Consequently, I will hyperlink to information elsewhere on the Internet, and I have some advice below about how they should relate to this essay.

I want to apologize to those among the Friends who are just now learning about my feelings by reading this essay. My failure to have given you some notice is frustrating for me. Some of you may feel slighted, as though I did not truly value our connection, and some of you may feel disappointed that I never gave you a chance to discuss what was happening between me and the Faith. Because I did talk with some of the Friends during this year, I feel that I owe an explanation to those of you who were left out, as well as some reassurances.

There were different reasons I did not have a thorough consultation with each of you. For the majority of you, it was really about time and energy, as the year since submitting my dissertation has been an intense period, including two international relocations and the complete reconfiguration of the life plans of myself and my wife. The right moment to have a conversation simply never came, despite wanting it. For some of you, there were opportunities, but I simply did not know how to formulate my thoughts and feelings in a way that could bridge the divide between your deep commitment to the Faith and my rapidly growing doubts in it. I cannot apologize enough, and I hope in the coming weeks and months, we will finally find the time.

I know from firsthand experience that the first reaction of many Bahá'ís to news of someone leaving the Faith, especially after that person had been a member for a significant part of their lives, is a mix of sadness and fear — sadness at losing someone dear to them, fear that this person will turn against them. I want to reiterate that my intention is not to become an enemy of the Faith. As you read on, you will

see that I do have very grave doubts about the Writing's complete veracity. However, I will try to be fair, accurate and precise in the statements I make below, for two reasons.

First, I would regret needlessly causing harm to the Bahá'í community by slandering its reputation. I especially do not want to scare away anyone from joining, for their experience with the Faith and their spiritual understanding and needs may be very different from mine. Toward this end, I will take pains to defend the Faith on some key points. For example, I will defend the Bahá'í leadership against the accusation of fundamentalism, which has been raised by former Bahá'ís like [Juan Cole](#). Granted, much depends on how “fundamentalism” is defined. Many religions can be described as “fundamentalist” insofar that they must take care to develop their concepts and practices in a manner consistent with the fundamentals of their belief systems. That said, insofar that “fundamentalism” connotes fanaticism, I want to assure the would-be Bahá'í at the outset that I do not believe this accusation is true.

Second and relatedly, I recognize that so much of what is at stake here has to do with perception and interpretation. That means there is a very real chance the problems I see are not entirely accurate or are just flat out incorrect, and even if they are accurate, my diagnoses of their causes may be totally off. As not only a now-former Bahá'í, but a former journalist and a trained philosopher with 13 years' experience in the Faith, there is a risk that a would-be Bahá'í might put too much stock in my opinions. My suggestion to those curious about the Faith is this: read my opinions, by all means take them seriously, but engage the [Writings](#) and the [Bahá'ís](#) for yourself, on your own terms. If you disagree with me and feel pulled to Bahá'u'lláh but simultaneously feel uncertain because of everything I will say here, trust yourself and join this religion.

3. Faith, truth and the real

Although I will be officially dis-enrolling from the Faith, when the feeling that I was done came, it was without a sense of finality. After becoming a Bahá'í in 2009, I often compared being in a religion to being in a marriage. While this analogy is quite powerful, where it does not work — and to the great credit of the Bahá'í framework — is that apostasy is much easier to undo than divorce. Put more simply, although I doubt that I will return to the Faith, I nevertheless reserve the right to reverse this decision if, for whatever reason, I again come to believe in Bahá'u'lláh.

Some of those with whom I have talked, both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í, have been perplexed by my detached attitude about membership in a religion. It has struck them as strange, artificial, overly intellectual, cowardly — as though I want to hedge my bets — or as one phrased it, “not how religion works”. I disagree with the latter about the nature of religion. As for the other accusations, it is not that I lack strength, will and commitment; it is that my strength, will and commitment are dedicated to truth, not a specific religion.

This is not at all to suggest that being committed to a belief system is an act of self-deception or conformism. It is possible in this life to be a “truth fanatic”, such that one confronts the vast plurality of

religions and, seeing their inevitable partiality and tendencies toward partisanship, denounces them all as insufficient or illusion. However, I do believe that our membership in a religion should be a function of our perception of its truth, not the other way around. It is healthy to have faith, but only if we have arrived at that faith by a sense of how deep its roots go in the earth of the real.

This is also not to suggest I, Christopher Schwartz, can ever attain truth in its completeness, or that I am priding my individual perception of truth over and above, say, the truth of revelation. What has been happening to me is that I have begun to detect a connection between the divine and our individual reasoning, by which I do not just mean our rationality, but the way in which we navigate the fullness of our createdness, our fragility and our resilience, the mortal and the immortal within us. Reasoning for me includes our emotionality, our embodiedness, our partialness.

I am still not entirely certain how to phrase the intuition, but when we use reason, we are expressing, connecting to, or in some sense implementing the divine. If, let me call it your “exercise” of the divine guides you to a revealed religion, then how is the atheist superior to you? By the very same terms, though outwardly seemingly very paradoxical, if your “exercise” of the divine leads you to atheism, then how is the theist superior to you?

While this may seem like an advocacy for relativism, that is not the case. That different perspectives can come to different conclusions using the same capacity or virtue within themselves may in a way be the divine intention. What matters is *how* they come to those conclusions, for there are genuine and healthy ways to do so, and there are disingenuous and unhealthy ways to do so. I will discuss this further below, when I discuss the unfortunate attraction of many Bahá’ís — far too many — toward egregious skepticism and conspiracy theories about vaccines, NATO, and the like. As I will try to explain below, the problem is not really *what* they believe, but *why* they believe, as well as the ways in which the Writings may be contributing to distorted and insincere thinking.

4. Reasons for leaving

My reason has led me to see too many problems with the Bahá’í Faith to remain committed to it. It has been all too much for me to ignore or rationalize. To do so would be to gaslight myself, my loved ones and the Friends themselves. My soul has been stirred to dig itself out from under this mountain.

The problems are not only sociological, but scriptural, by which I mean they are not only aspects of inevitably fallible human beings building an inevitably fallible community — the Bahá’ís themselves will be the first to admit this — but are actually sourced in the Writings. Realizing this has been lethal for my membership. The Bahá’í Writings are not like other Abrahamic scriptures, for they not only purport to have a kind of consensus univocality, but for the most part achieve it. This success is owed not only to the concepts of the Center of the Covenant and authorized interpretation, but also to the deep agreement between the authors of the Writings and the ideas they passed on to each other one

generation after the next. Moreover, the Writings portray themselves as inerrant. Thus, to see serious problems in them is to place oneself in a collision course with the Faith.

On a side note, I have been very seriously considering to return to Christianity. More importantly, one of the key features attracting me to Christianity has been one of the features that caused me to turn away from it years ago: its age. Having grown up in a mainline church, I have seen how, given enough time and sincerity, doctrines can relax and give way to a spirit of temperance, humility and realism, even if the literal word of the Bible seems to enjoin otherwise — indeed, that spirit is often applied to the Bible itself. Perhaps it will one day be the same for the Bahá'ís and the Writings, especially if they are eventually successful in overcoming their current status as a marginal religion. If so, though, that will still be long off in the future, for the Bahá'ís first need to succeed, then fail, as the Christians did.

Back on track: beneath the many problems I have indicated, there are ultimately three core reasons for my departure. First, the Bahá'ís are so focused on building a community, they are not being a community. Second, my understanding of the self sharply diverges from the Bahá'í understanding of it. And third, deep down, I do not believe in God in the way the Bahá'í Faith does. I also have many specific concerns of a less doctrinal nature, most or all of which revolve around the place of the legacy of the Enlightenment in the Writings, which I will discuss after this section.

4.1. Building, not being, a community

For many Bahá'ís, my distinction between building and being a community is meaningless given the Faith's mission to establish a future divine civilization. They will also point out that community life is alive with all sorts of activities, and that many Bahá'ís are, as it were, *just being*: they are friends and family with each other, having fun and supporting each other. Finally, they will note that “of course” there are many simply not in a position to directly contribute to the processes of growth because of their life situations.

I think these points are certainly right, but the problem is subtle. Even those parts of Bahá'í community life seemingly not connected to building are ultimately still framed in its terms. The issue is not whether Bahá'í community life is *actually* cycloptically focused on building, but rather that *conceptually* it is, and this inevitably influences the communal dynamic — although to also be clear, what I and others have personally experienced is an actual cycloptic focus on building, in which the Core Activities and accounting take priority over everything else. My point here is that ultimately the only way to be authentically a Bahá'í is to build, or at least contribute to the building; just being is fine, but only ever as a pause.

Yet, even pausing seems to be problematized. To my knowledge, never in its messages has the Universal House of Justice indicated that a time is coming when the international community will slow down its pursuit of growth for a few years to take stock, consolidate what has been achieved, and breathe and enjoy. If such a time is coming, it does not feel like it will come in my lifetime. Why is this

detail important? As the infallible ruling authority of the Bahá'í world, the House establishes the norms of our communities, and Haifa's focus has been squarely on growth.

Before it seems like I am about to do what other former Bahá'ís have done and accuse the House of fundamentalism, I want to point two things. First, I have directly experienced their efforts, as well as the efforts of the Counselors, precisely to combat fanaticism, especially when zealous Spiritual Assemblies begin violating Bahá'ís' private lives. Second and more importantly, the fervent quest to build is not their opinion or whim, but a command explicitly and repeatedly given in the Writings.

Sometimes the accusation of fundamentalism is really intended to be an accusation of literalism. There are two points to be made here. The first is that as an exegetical strategy, literalism gets an unfair bad reputation. It is true that unsophisticated literalism easily descends into cherry-picking and worse, but there are sophisticated forms of literalism that recognize and wrangle with the many paradoxes and difficulties of performing such an exegesis well — and I believe the House is sincerely striving to do it well. Moreover, no text can be read entirely metaphorically, least of all scriptures. Sooner or later, we all must be literalists at least some of the time.

The other point is this: the fact of the matter is that the Writings do actually stipulate that they must be read more or less literally by those not authorized to interpret them, and those individuals have long passed on. More precisely, the Writings permit individual Bahá'ís to have their own personal interpretations, so long as they are properly evidenced in the scriptural text. However, what the community believes as a whole must be arrived at through literalist readings of the scripture framed by what the authorized interpreters have left behind. The House is permitted some latitude, but as I understand it, almost exclusively in the domain of implementation: their purpose is not to think about what should be believed in the Faith, but to think about how to institute what has already been established as the belief system.

Other times, the accusation of fundamentalism is really intended to be an accusation of dogmatism, and this is an accusation with which I am sympathetic. However, the dogmatism has not just fallen from the sky and landed on the Bahá'ís: it is a direct result of the kind of mentality that the Writings, intentionally or unintentionally, end up cultivating. This will become more clear when I discuss the conception of the self in the next subsection.

Realizing all of this has put me in an unpleasant position. The House's decision to devote all Bahá'ís to the goal of achieving "entry by troops" is fully justified by the Writings. Moreover, the Writings put forward a fairly thought-through policy with respect to how to interpret them, which the House is dutifully abiding by. I therefore do not see a case to be made that the House is cherry-picking or engaging in some other exegetical duplicity or perversion — and yet, I remain deeply troubled by their overriding focus on entry by troops. So, what is going on here? To return to my distinction between the sociological and the scriptural, the problem I have been seeing is not with the Bahá'í leadership, but in the very foundations of the Bahá'í Faith itself.

Let me back up for a moment. Earlier I distinguished between what actually happens in Bahá'í community life versus what is conceptually really called for by the Writings. Even earlier, I indicated that some traditions Christianity are not only subject to this same distinction, but have been wise to embrace it, and that perhaps one day the Bahá'ís will do the same. The truth is, I doubt the latter will happen. That is because, as I also already noted, the nature of Christian and Bahá'í scriptures are quite different, the attempts of many Christians to force univocality onto the Bible notwithstanding. To put it bluntly, it is far more possible for the Christian to be less beholden to the literal word and consider its spirit, or to take a more textually critical approach, than it is for a Bahá'í.

Moreover, a spirit of temperance, humility and realism may be inherent to Christianity overall, not just some traditions of it. Why? Potentially what ultimately matters most in the Christian faith is not its editorially complicated scripture, but the Sermon on the Mount and the mythology of the life, miracles, death and resurrection of Christ. The Bahá'í mythology is different in its content, with scripture, which is upheld as a literal charter for a future world order, taking center stage in it. And to be very clear, the Writings will not be a charter like, say, the constitution of the United States, which can be amended by the citizens of that country through their elected representatives. No, the Writings will be an inerrant charter that must be accepted more or less wholesale by all those who declare themselves to be Bahá'ís, and because Shoghi Effendi has made very clear that the Faith is supposed to be the state religion of the future civilization, non-Bahá'ís must somehow reconcile themselves to it.

Returning to the main topic here, some Bahá'ís do acknowledge the distinction between building and being, but they see it as just the lot of our particular historical moment, as after all, the civilization — which is presumably when Bahá'ís, and humanity as a whole, can finally just *be* — is still being built. I have always been sympathetic to this idea. However, when we really read the Writings' vision for the future, it is hard not to come away with the feeling that human unity will just lead to more work. Again, I come to scripture as the source of the problem I am seeing: there simply does not seem to be any *rest* in the Bahá'í future, much less any enjoyment of the great gift of our existence, just ceaseless labor. The labor is supposed to be blissful, yes, but I expect it would instead prove grinding.

I want to be very careful in what I am trying to say here, so three nuances are in order. First, non-Bahá'ís may be shocked that I am focusing on this theme of ceaseless labor as the problem of the Bahá'í community and not the fact that what Bahá'ís seem to be striving to establish is a planetary theocracy. The reason I am not ringing the alarm bell on this is that there may not be a bell worthy of ringing. Yes, I am worried a planetary theocracy *might* be the goal, but many of the Friends I have known have actually been very wary to describe the future as theocratic, not because they know that will sound terrible to secular ears, but because they genuinely believe and hope that the political categories of the future will be so unimaginably different from the political categories of today that concepts like “theocracy” and “secularism” will simply stop making sense. Considering how many of our political categories today would be utterly incomprehensible to our ancestors, this is a very fair

point. Anyone, even a spiritually illuminated person like Shoghi Effendi, would have profound difficulty imagining an unimaginable future.

Second, although I have come to have problems with the specific form of global unity the Writings seem to envision — an absolute and enduring unity of purpose and attention — I still believe in unity. My problems with the specific Bahá'í conception of unity would be worthy of an essay of its own, so I will not delve into it here; let it suffice that on this score I am, so to speak, a federalist, not a unitarian, or as the Unitarian Universalists might put it, I believe in a covenantal union, not a creedal one. Nevertheless, Bahá'u'lláh is truly prophetic in His basic insight that union is both necessary and inevitable for our species and our planet.

Third, of course it is not as though the more desirable future is some kind of stasis. Once again, the problem is subtle: it is not that labor will still need to be done in the future, it is that, as far as I can see, there will *only* be labor.

All this being said, was not building a civilization what I signed up for in 2009? It was indeed. The Bahá'ís have *never once* dissimulated about the immense spiritual significance they ascribe to the House's growth plans. Some non-Bahá'ís have suggested that I simply have “buyer's regret”, or that my “old soul” is not really fit for participating in a religion as youthfully ambitious as the Bahá'í Faith. I know myself — a problematic claim from the Bahá'í perspective, as I will try to explain further below — so I know these diagnoses are not true for me, but the point does still stand that the Bahá'ís have not at all misrepresented themselves in this respect.

Still, I have recently seen Friends leave the Faith precisely because of the lack of conceptual authenticity afforded to the choice and need to just be. Worse, they have left with bitterness, even rage, as though something sacred about themselves had been violated. And I have seen how the Friends respond to those who leave on these grounds, and it is unfriendly: it is those who leave who are fault, not the Faith. Here is where I come to my second core problem and reason for leaving.

4.2. The Self

Precisely how many people are actually leaving the Faith, and for which reasons, is an issue for which we do not seem to have statistics, and this is concerning. Yet, what I see here is not some conspiratorial intent. Instead, I see fear, and an unwillingness to countenance the possibility that the Faith itself may be what is driving people out from it, not all the various rationalizations Bahá'ís use to explain away this problem and deny its seriousness, such as materialism, attachments and veils.

It took me many years to realize this, but the Writings do not really promote self-knowledge; rather, they promote a more abstract notion of self-perfection. In a manner that parallels what the scriptures enjoin for the community as a whole, viz., to always build and never be, self-perfection is something we do not yet possess, it is something that must be pursued, and relentlessly so.

Once more, I need to be very careful with what I am attempting to articulate here. Both self-knowledge and self-perfection require self-confrontation, so it should logically follow that self-perfection requires self-knowledge. On what grounds, then, do I think the Faith does not promote self-knowledge?

The Writings view us as ontologically imperfect but also as ontologically perfectible. In other words, what we are is *inherently insufficient*, but we can be far better than what we are, albeit only with supreme effort. This can be read very superficially as just a run-of-the-mill inspirational call to improve ourselves. That is not what the Writings are putting forward. No, what they are really putting forward is an approach to the self that has caused so many of the Friends to suffer in a way secret not only from each other, but also from themselves.

There is an even-keeled way in which we all could and should improve, and then there is the frenetic, obsessive way in which the Faith says we must improve. Put differently, there can be a love-based imperative to grow in wisdom, so as to be a boon to ourselves, our loved ones and our fellow citizens in the cosmopolis of existence — and in doing so, fulfill an ineffable need, some divine yearning, deep within ourselves — and there is the shame-based imperative to transform put forward by the Writings, one in which we risk squandering our near-infinite potential, indeed, risk letting Bahá'u'lláh down, even if, as He Himself states, we hesitate only for a moment.

Simply put, the Faith has a dearth of psychological realism and an excess of psychological idealism, justified on the grounds that the Manifestation of God knows the mind better than we do or ever can. And yet, what the Manifestation of God has put forward as spiritualized psychology is a shame-driven pursuit of self-perfection, a never-good-enough-ness, an endless labor. Even the afterlife is portrayed as a ceaseless struggle to be better, to be *worthy*.

The shame-driven pursuit of self-perfection is manifested in the Faith in at least two ways. First, there is a distinct lack of practicality throughout much of the community, and this is something against which I have butted my head for years. Second, there is a widespread tendency to think of virtue and sin in a manner that rejects our embodiedness and fragility.

With respect to the lack of practicality, let me illustrate by example: to this day many Bahá'í communities continue with door-to-door knocking campaigns, even when such campaigns are illegal, as they are in many countries. I have tried to explain to the Friends how other religions that engage in these campaigns, such as the Latter Day Saints, have done extensive studies of their effectiveness and have come to realize that they are ineffective at gaining new recruits, and instead find value in them as a sort of spiritual practice for the believers. I have also tried to explain that such campaigns risk generating negative publicity or arousing the ire of authorities.

Many Bahá'ís simply do not want to hear this. They will say things to me like, “We have the truth, the Mormons don't,” or, “God will work miracles.” Such statements can be easily mistaken as naivety, zeal

or having too simplistic a faith, but my intuition is that they really arise from a concern to perform, a go-go-go-ness, a fear of hesitating; there is also an unwillingness to fully countenance the fragility of either the Bahá'í Faith as an historical entity, or their own selves as real people.

How are these things connected? If it is in some sense wrong to attempt to know ourselves, then it is wrong to make assessments about what we are and are not capable of, as well as to make assessments about the risks certain actions could entail, and in general to make assessments about how failure or worse are very real possibilities. Indeed, the risk such assessments would be taking would not be failure in this nether world of fleeting shadows, but failure to let the light of the divine blaze into us, transform us, and then erupting through us, burn away all the shadows around us. "Everything is in God's hands," they say to me, again and again. "We must only act."

With respect to virtue and sin, I do not mean the surface level of terminology, but the actual psychological practices within the community. Take lust and anger for example. I have noticed two broad strategies Bahá'ís use to deal with these: one is puritan, the other stoic. Puritans seek to purge themselves of these feelings, while stoics seek to overcome them. These strategies are really just differences of degrees, for neither treats their lust and anger as aspects of their being to truly understand and accept as part of who they are, indeed, as put into them by the very God that created their bodies.

Again, it is not that lust and anger should not be disciplined, but these feelings do have their rightful places in our lives; even shame has its rightful place. For example, it is right to have lust for our spouses, to be angered at injustice, and to be ashamed when we ourselves commit injustice. However, the Writings are very clear that such feelings are dross on the mirrors of our true selves, and we must be wiped clean. Note that this mirror analogy is not mine, but a motif regularly used by Bahá'u'lláh Himself.

Since realizing this, I have often thought of the story of Christ's hermitage in the desert, where he confronted His temptations as preparation for the start of His ministry. There is a strikingly similar story from the biography of Bahá'u'lláh, in which He lived in Kurdistan for two years as an ascetic. Beneath their remarkable symbolic symmetry, though, the contents of the two moments are opposed: Christ reckoned with Himself, whereas Bahá'u'lláh left Baghdad to reduce conflict within the nascent Faith, and spent most of those years in a sort of splendid isolation, until He was gradually surrounded by Sufis drawn to His spiritual power.

Although Christ's hermitage is one of the key stories of Christians, Bahá'u'lláh's hermitage has long struck me as being primarily a curiosity for Bahá'ís. A few months ago, I had an argument with a Friend about this difference. I recall saying to them, "Just based on the accounts of it that have come down to us, it seems like Bahá'u'lláh didn't use those years to confront His flaws." The Friend's response struck me as telling: "Of course He didn't! He didn't have any flaws to confront!"

4.3. God

Earlier, I indicated that there is no valid way in the Faith to make claims about who we are, because there is no valid self. The self, by definition, is an obstacle to perfection and ultimately union with God. What do I mean, and how does this relate to my third reason for leaving, which concerns theology?

As someone who has struggled immensely to have the career I have felt called to do, I have reckoned with this issue in the Faith directly. There is an unhealthy, inflexible way to develop, formulate and act on the self, let us call it the American way. I will always be grateful to the many Friends who challenged my culture's cult of authenticity and how it manifested within me. However, looking back, grateful though I am, I see that their arguments tended toward the opposite extreme: if only I could completely let go of my desires and self-perceptions, not only "who knows" what I could become, as the long-term results could prove unimaginable, but I would also be happy with the results, regardless of what they would be, even if, as one Friend put it straightly, they involved my "complete destruction". If the American approach is to radically overstate the self's capacity to accurately testify itself to itself and to others, as well as to actualize that testimony — as arguably is being seen in today's culture wars about identity — the Bahá'í approach is to cast the self as, at best, a dusty pile of attachments, and at worst, a sort of illusion, thereby delegitimizing it.

At first glance, the Bahá'í approach may seem indistinguishable from the traditional Abrahamic notion of surrender, i.e., "Let go and let God" as Christians are fond of saying, or the whole notion of *islam* in the Muslim faith. This may be so, but I am suspicious that what is really at work here is the Bahá'í concept of self-perfection, according to which the self is an obstacle to the fulfillment of the sheer potentiality of the soul. Simply put, by definition we cannot know ourselves, because we cannot know our limits, only God can; at the very least, we cannot know our limits without a radical willingness to be revised by God.

This can be interpreted superficially: "of course" we cannot know our limits, "of course" we can only find out by being open to what the divine wills for us, and so on. I do actually believe in these ideas, but I also believe what the Writings intend is not so much us intentionally surrendering with hope and faith, perhaps with a sense of adventure and discovery, but us not having the authority to be able to decide for ourselves who we are. Now, I fully admit that Bahá'ís are not alone in holding to this viewpoint, as we often hear it from the more severe movements within the other Abrahamic religions, but that does not mean I need to agree with this severity, much less adhere to it.

The divine can be thought of as a monarch, in which case we are at best vassals, at worst serfs, or the divine can be thought of as a parent, a lover, a gardener, in which case we are loved ones to cherish and seeds to nurture. The very first Bahá'í prayer I ever heard remains my favorite, and parts of it happen to be appropriate to invoke regarding to this very point. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, "O God! We are as plants, and Thy bounty is as the rain; refresh and cause these plants to grow through Thy bestowal. [...] We are ignorant; make us wise. We are dead; make us alive. [...] We are deprived; make us the intimates of

Thy mysteries. We are needy; enrich and bless us from Thy boundless treasury. O God! Resuscitate us; give us sight; give us hearing; familiarize us with the mysteries of life, so that the secrets of Thy kingdom may become revealed to us in this world of existence and we may confess Thy oneness.”

Re-reading this passage, it is striking to me that a religion as keen on potentiality as the Bahá'í Faith is, is at the same time concerned with centralizing the decision-making about how to develop and use that potentiality. It is striking, but it is logical, for the Writings clearly envision Bahá'ís as embarking on a great labor, sometimes described as nothing less than a crusade. Self exploration and discovery are not the appropriate motifs for such a conceptualization, soldiering and discipline are far more fitting.

None of this is to suggest that we do not at times need to soldier on and be disciplined — to the contrary. Like many conservative religionists today, Bahá'ís are right to point out that a culture overly concerned with exploration and discovery will eventually decay. Yet, there is a different way to approach the self, a middle way, in which how we conceptualize the self ceases to be an either/or between absolute submission and absolute freedom, but instead a wisdom, slowly built through trial, error and the hard-won insights of previous generations, in which one becomes sufficiently discerning to know, not with certainty but with confidence, when to submit and when to be free.

That middle way is through how we conceptualize the divine. My intuition here is clear but the specifics are very hazy, but I will try to express it in the following way. Thinking more broadly and abstractly than the traditional categories of mind, soul and body, it is God that has made each of us a *perspective* in this universe, a distinct angle, viewpoint, position. Immediately, this means the fundamental aspects of our perspective, such as our feelings and desires, are ontologically legitimate, as is the self, which in its most basic form is both the apparatus by which we implement our perspective, and the avatar representing it to ourselves and to each other.

We come to know, testify, doubt, challenge, revise and refine the self through reason, in a dance with the self, often tense and fraught, but just as often elegant and sublime. Reason enables us to do something miraculous: partially step out from our perspective. In so doing, we can somewhat see ourselves — thereby becoming able to have the complex but ultimately positive relationship with the self that is both our duty and our birthright — and make ourselves understood by others, as well as to collaborate with them, have solidarity and meaningful relationships with them. We can also see entire situations, thereby becoming able to do things like science, psychology, philosophy, art and religion.

Now, I am not suggesting that God is reason per se, but instead is the means by which we reason. There is a sort of metaphysics to this intuition that I am still working out, including about the inner logic of existence and the necessities it might in some sense impose on the divine.

My impression is that reason is the sensation of navigating all of the elements of our perspectiveness. That navigation occurs simultaneously *toward*, *with reference to* and *via* a sort of non-perspective stance on a phenomenon, a stranger's stance if you will, what Thomas Nagel has called the “view from

nowhere”. The stranger’s stance can be toward anything, including ourselves, and that sensation which it enables and which we call “reasoning” is experienced inwardly, but it is also clear that it can be in some way shared between perspectives, as we have all experienced mutual and group reasoning, which is all the more miraculous. And were this all not bewildering enough, my further sense is that inner navigation we embark on is also enabled *by* the stranger, almost as though reason were the stranger positioning itself vis-à-vis itself through each of us.

Many threads have led me to thinking about God in the way that I am now. There were the many visceral experiences of wrestling with the temptations of reductionism within myself, within my loved ones, and within our polarized and disinformation-drenched world. Among the intellectual threads, some will be obvious, such as my grandparents’ book *Faith Through Reason* and my studies of Ibn Rushd (Averroes), Michael Tomasello and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, but there have also been Isocrates, Claude Lefort, Chaïm Perelman, Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, Margaret Gilbert, Alain Badiou and the Bahá’í Writings themselves, in particular *The Four Valleys*’ reference to the “[universal divine mind](#)” (also translated as the “universal divine Intellect”). Regarding that passage, I can already hear protests. I understand that a [similar passage](#) in *The Seven Valleys* is explicitly against the interpretation I am giving this phrase. I also understand that Bahá’u’lláh [rejects pantheism](#), and I probably do to an extent, as well. I may be something of a [panentheist](#), not a pantheist, for I want to say that the stranger is not just a highly attenuated schematic perspective that we semi-consciously deploy whenever we reason, but is literally real, and is either God, or the extension or echo of God in the creation.

The point I want to drive home here is not some still-developing personal metaphysics or theology, but the intuition, sharp and delicate as a newborn blade of grass pushing up from my soul through the soil of my experiences and perception, that all the many ways that the Bahá’í Faith is not only impractical, unrealistic, unwise and unreasonable, but seems to *enjoin* impracticality, unrealism, un wisdom and unreasonability on the Friends, strikes me as nothing less than a sacrilege against God. Our practicality, our wisdom, our realism and our reason — whichever descriptor we want to use for this capacity and latent virtue within us — is rooted in, and may very well be an expression of, the divine.

If I have not been sufficiently clear, then: I am not trumpeting rationality and the intellect, which I see as only aspects of what I am attempting to describe. I am also not saying we should blindly obey our mind and thoughts, as clearly not everything that happens within the skull is true and connected to reality. For me, reason is a sort of deep intuition, a navigation *between* intellect and emotion, mind and body, subjective and objective, and so on.

Nor am I denying that sometimes this divinity within us can and must lead to its own surrender, paradoxically to itself, under another guise as it were. If this description sounds confusing to you, that is because, once again, the intuition is clear, but the metaphysics or theology around it is not, and may never be. What I can say for sure is that there are moments that surrender *must* happen. For example, earlier I described myself as committed to truth, and such a commitment requires surrender.

I am circling back to the issue of surrender because it is precisely the need for it that the Faith will raise in protest here. It is the divine within us that shows us when surrender of the self is truly required. We must not otherwise be committing an automatic and wholesale surrendering of the self, for ironically, doing so would be no better than a wholesale and automatic surrendering of the soul, and doing either is not piety, but risks idolatry. Yet, it is idolatry that I fear the Faith might be requiring of the Friends. And that idol, I need to underline, might have a face of sorts, if a vague one: it is the future divine civilization, far in the future, that Bahá'ís are constantly striving to build here and now.

There is something I must confess, which is that the idea that civilization needs to be “divinized” or “spiritualized”, and moreover, that this is some state of affairs that will and only be achieved in the future, no longer makes sense to me, as I now feel that civilization *is* already and inherently divine. This is not to say that civilization has been or is perfectly ethical and just, much less well organized, but rather to see in all of our many struggles a great aspiration to express the divine within, as well as a great elaboration of the divine itself. This, too, is a complicated point that requires far more nuanced explanation than I can give here, so it will need to suffice that I do not see the many contradictions and problems as indicative of either, as the Bahá'ís see it, symptoms of disease — although I do wholeheartedly agree with them that disunity underlies the critical mass of our problems throughout history and right through to today — or as some philosophers have seen it, as things that must be completely overcome and sublimated.

There is another important point I need to address, which the astute have probably picked up on: I accuse the Faith of delegitimizing our divinely-given capacity and divinely-sanctioned right to decide for ourselves who we are, and yet, I am also suggesting that we are not truly any of the things that compose the self, such as our intellect and our emotions, our mind and our body, our subjectivity and our perception of the objective, and so on, which is tantamount to saying that we are not the self. How is this suggestion at all different from what the Faith holds?

I think the difference is that I see the self as fundamentally valid, while the Faith, as I asserted earlier, does not. However, this difference is not as simple as me just asserting that God wants us to have selves, for Bahá'ís also believe that. The difference is how the divine intention is framed: it seems to me that the Faith seems to believe in a divine conspiracy which uses the self as a test. In other words, for Bahá'ís, God imposes the self onto the soul so that the latter may then learn to liberate itself.

Frankly, the notion of “tests” in general has come to seem dangerous and monstrous to me. While not at all exclusive to the Bahá'ís, the idea that the divine literally tortures us so that we may develop our virtues and capacities — and more maddeningly still, not even for the sake of this life and the future civilization for which we sacrifice so much, but for our posthumous existence which Bahá'u'lláh describes as literally inconceivable — now seems so horrible that I am horrified I once believed it. To be sure, to exist is to suffer, and there can be great wisdom and transformation wrought through challenge and pain. To also be sure, my understanding of the divine also envisions a universe in which suffering was always elemental to its creation. Yet, there is a subtle but vast difference between

suffering as a metaphysical and existential necessity, and *torture* as a metaphysical and existential necessity. And that the self itself would be posed as not only the locus of that torture, but the greatest source of it, seems not only horrible, but also false.

God has not imprisoned us within ourselves so that we can bloody our fingers until we pick the lock and escape the jail. We must not allow ourselves to become trapped in the self, yes, but the self also need not be a cage. Yet, that is precisely how the Writings describe it. For example, in the Persian *Hidden Words* #38: “O Son of Spirit! Burst thy cage asunder, and even as the phoenix of love soar into the firmament of holiness. Renounce thyself and, filled with the spirit of mercy, abide in the realm of celestial sanctity.” Or two passages later, in #40: “O My Servant! Free thyself from the fetters of this world, and loose thy soul from the prison of self. Seize thy chance, for it will come to thee no more.”

As with everything else, I need to be very careful here, because many people genuinely do experience their selves as prisons and would be excited at the prospect of being able to break free. Our society today is struggling to sort out, both philosophically and politically, dysmorphia of the body. However, dysmorphia might also express with respect to the mind itself, with a person desiring to literally to think completely differently than they do. I, myself, have probably experienced this to a degree. I am fascinated with the [Myers-Briggs Typology Indicators](#), and while I fully recognize [its pseudoscientific nature](#), I have always found much descriptive utility in its ideas. However, I have not always related to the system in a healthy way, for there were many times over the years that I yearned to “not be” my cognitive personality type, which is an ENFP, and instead to be a more analytical, stoic and pragmatic type, such as an ENTJ or ISTP. I suspect the issue here was not really MBTI, but rather my relationship to my own emotions and the ways of thinking that come naturally to me. I imagine that as technology advances in the arenas of virtual reality, alternate reality and neurological interfacing, dysmorphia of the self may become expressed in a more distilled fashion, such that people begin to yearn to literally escape their perspectives entirely, as in the film [Strange Days](#).

Dysmorphia, and its fellow travelers depersonalization and derealization, is not an inherently deleterious phenomenon, for it can lead to great insights and positive transformations within the self. Yet, it is a force with which extreme care is needed, for while dysmorphia in-itself is not necessarily deleterious, just going along with it, uncritically acceding to it wholesale, *is* deleterious. Yes, dysmorphia could be the soul genuinely begging the self to hear her desperate call, but it could also be the self raping the soul, or worst of all, the soul clawing its own face through the mirror of the self. Very unfortunately, the Bahá’í Faith seems dysmorphic to me, for it distorts the relationship between soul and self, constantly demanding the surrender of the former to the latter. They are supposed to be partners, not master and slave, much less adversaries locked in a cycle of repression and revolt.

On this point, there has been a passage in the Writings that has bothered me from the very start. When I first joined the Faith, I told myself that I just did not understand Bahá’u’lláh, but as the years went by, I began to worry that I did actually understand Him, and what I understood disturbed me greatly. The passage can be found in *Gleanings* [#153.6](#) and reads: “Ye are even as the bird which soareth, with the

full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust.” What I find so troubling about this passage is that the bird *must* eat to survive, yet according to this passage, doing so *damns* it.

This is probably one of the most popular passages in the Writings within the community, often set to music and art, yet I have often found that Bahá'ís do not want to think about it too closely, and even when they do, they want to chalk up what it is suggesting to hyperbole. Hyperbole is certainly one of the hallmark features of the Writings — which in itself is problematic considering that the Friends are supposed to take the scriptures literally, or at the very least very seriously, unless otherwise instructed by the authors — but this passage seems to be sincerely putting forward an analogy of the relationship between the soul and the self, and the analogy is dymorphic. The correct choice is for the bird to resist its instinct and imperative to survive *and starve to death*, so that in doing so, somehow it may defy the very laws of nature that the divine established and may remain in the sky. However, those laws are real: it cannot stay in the sky if it starves to death. The bird is embodied: it has hunger for a valid reason, namely, to be able to fly in the sky!

I must underline that the Writings' hyperbole, not only in this passage but throughout the scriptures, is not just stylistic flourish or emotional expression, but quite spiritually and theologically purposeful. They portray the bird here as set up by God to fail. If that is not the case, then the only other conceivable interpretation is that the bird must relentlessly push itself, upward and upward, in denial of the needs placed into it by the divine and the natural laws erected around it also by the divine, and all in the mad belief that somehow it will eventually soar free of the bonds of gravity. I understand that a dosage of asceticism is good for us all, and I also understand whole notion of becoming “[mad with the divine](#)”. Yet, as with everything else, the quality of these things hinge on their underlying theology, and this theology seems to me to be so very mistaken.

5. The Enlightenment heritage

I have left out some important specific issues that have weighed on me, such as the Bahá'í stance on LGBT. I wholeheartedly agree with the Bahá'ís on two points: one, that far too much emphasis is given to sexual and gender identity in our culture today, from both the Right and the Left, and two, that both sides are far too convinced of their metaphysics of sexual and gender identity, when in reality our species is still at the very beginning of grappling with it. Yet, in my heart of hearts, I feel that the Faith's [overall stance on the issue](#) — that LGBT is a product of lust and confusion, and the only virtuous expression of sexual desire and gender identity is heteronormative marriage — is both infantilizing and unjust. I also have misgivings about [the inability of women to serve on the House](#). The Biblical scholar Daniel MacLellan [says it well](#): even if we grant that there is an equality of value between men and women, so long as there remains an inequality of role, the empowered party will need to be constantly reminded of the equality of the disempowered party, and inevitably, the concerns of the latter will be marginalized. I could continue, but what I think is beneath most if not all of my concerns is the Faith's relationship to the Enlightenment.

[The Enlightenment](#) was the 17th- and 18th-century religious, philosophical and political movement that gave rise, among other things, to liberalism (not to be confused with the contemporary American use of the term “liberalism”). The Enlightenment was less a specific set of ideas and more a range of values on the importance of human flourishing, the pursuit of knowledge through reason and evidence, collective and individual liberty, respect for difference, constitutional governance and rights, the separation of religion and state, and rule of law, to name some of the major ones. Enlightenment values are the root of democracy, so they persist to this day and have been interwoven with the values of other important movements, such as the importance of tradition from conservatism (i.e., Edmund Burke), majoritarian prosperity from utilitarianism, solidarity from socialism, private property from capitalism, social justice from progressivism, and pluralism from post-modernism. Again, I am just naming here some major values and movements, and also noting that there are strong cases to be made that these specific values both precede and transcend these specific movements.

To be clear on an important point before proceeding: I do not believe the historical Enlightenment was perfect or consistent, either in its concepts or in its implementation. Although I understand why it happened, it nevertheless is striking that so many Enlightenment thinkers and activists were unenlightened about race, gender and the environment. The Enlightenment also produced its own fanatics and radicals, most notably in the French Revolution. However, what the Enlightenment brought — and which I believe continues to bring as we work out its inner logic and outer implications — was a shift in humanity's basic relationship to the universe and ourselves. This shift placed great faith in the intelligibility of experience, our ability to use reason to grasp that intelligibility, the necessity of liberty for the proper functioning of reasoning, and the value in doing so, whether that value is expressed in terms of material prosperity or spiritual flourishing.

One of the key things that has vexed me for many years has been [Bahá'u'lláh's criticism of liberty](#) in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: “Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench. Thus warneth you He Who is the Reckoner, the All-Knowing. Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness. Regard men as a flock of sheep that need a shepherd for their protection. This, verily, is the truth, the certain truth. We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others. We, verily, are the All-Knowing. Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.”

There is a way in which I deeply agree with parts of this passage: if my intuition about the connection between the divine and reason is correct, and if that intuition is substituted for the divinity invoked in this passage, then there is nothing inherently problematic in the idea that discipline and submission to God are true liberty, as the pursuit of truth literally requires such discipline and is an act of submission to God. Obviously, though, Bahá'u'lláh is not subscribed to my conception of the divine, and so what troubles me is His understanding of liberty as ultimately seditious and beastly. It is certainly true that a banal and grimy understanding of liberty has come to pervade the United States in particular, much to my frustration. However, I do not believe this has been the inevitable outcome of liberty *in se*, as much as the outcome of forces that have been unfolding in our culture and political-economic system since the mid-20th century.

With respect to the pursuit of knowledge, given my professional status as an academic and former journalist, I feel duty-bound to comment on the notion of “[Bahá'í review](#)”, in which members of the Bahá'í community must seek permission of their presiding National Spiritual Assembly before publishing content about the Faith. Many former Bahá'ís believe the practice amounts to unethical censorship. By contrast, active Bahá'ís have tended to see it as really nothing more than quality control, ensuring that nothing wantonly inaccurate is claimed about the Faith. It might come as a surprise, but I have actually had very little direct experience with Bahá'í review, and what I did have was not only very collegial, but the authorities deferred to my expertise over their perceptions.

Moreover, my understanding is that Bahá'í review does not apply to content that has already undergone some kind of established and rigorous vetting process, such as academic peer-review or journalistic copy-editing; it also seems to not apply to blog posts and the like, so long as these are of a clearly personal nature. The leadership has also repeatedly signaled that they see it as a temporary measure while the Faith is still trying to achieve entry by troops.

My overall impression is that former Bahá'ís might be confusing the Faith's inability to criticize itself with literal censorship, which to my knowledge has not happened. They may have felt pressure not to

criticize the Faith while still members of it, but I think it is also important to ask whether such pressure was real or perceived, and actually arose from within themselves as Bahá'ís. Which is not to deny that the Faith has periodically struggled with anti-intellectualism, leading to hair-raising incidents such as whatever happened to the “Talisman” list-serv, but I see these struggles more as an expression of the Faith's internal contradictions than active censorship. The contradiction arises from how the Writings simultaneously enjoin Bahá'ís to pursue knowledge while discouraging them from reasoning critically and effectively. Knowledge should be pursued only insofar that it advances the building of the Bahá'í community, and reckoning with thorny issues like the infallibility of the House may be tolerated, but is not really promoted.

I suppose if there is anything to be really concerned with here, it is that the Faith does countenance the possibility of censorship as a legitimate action under certain circumstances. However, this is not necessarily offensive to me; it really depends on what is being censored and why. You may be shocked: how could I, as a philosopher and former journalist, say this? In my dissertation I described myself as a “free speech traditionalist” and one of the members of my jury was curious as to what I meant, as this is not a term normally used in the debates around free speech. I meant, and still mean, conviction in the relevance and prudence of the specifically American tradition of free speech, which despite stereotypes about it, is extremely sophisticated and does believe not all speech is protected. It is a very difficult needle to thread, I readily admit it, but it is the middle way.

This all leads me to the question of the broader place of the Enlightenment heritage in the Faith. To be very frank, I closed my eyes too long to a tendency of Bahá'ís to reject the entirety of the Enlightenment heritage as a matter of ideological principle, ranging from mainstream science to the rules-based liberal international order (again, “liberal” not in the contemporary American sense of the word). I began to confront this sad reality during the COVID-19 crisis, when I argued with Friends who were adamantly opposed to vaccinations and lockdowns, and my breaking point was reached following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, when they blamed everything on NATO and Western hypocrisy, and portrayed Moscow as a liberator, or considered the international community to just be hopelessly corrupt and all sides as evil.

I need to be very clear here about two things. First, not all Bahá'ís are subject to these ideas. I have found that education and exposure to medicine, science and international institutions has been one factor, as well as important Bahá'í values, such as striving for excellence and temperance. I also believe that many of the Bahá'ís who engage in staunch rejectionism have untreated mental health issues, either stemming from personal tragedies, divergent neurochemistry, or a profound sensitivity to injustice. The Writing's focus on constant action and progress probably does not help them, but it is important to distinguish between what they bring to scripture as people versus what the scripture, in turn, brings to them.

Second, my problem is not really with what they believe, but *why* they believe. Yes, I believe that what they believe is wrong and destructive, but I defend their right to believe these things. The bigger

problem is this: at the surface level, the rejection of the Enlightenment heritage is an extreme interpretation of Bahá'u'lláh's prophecy that the current world order will be "rolled up" to be replaced by civilization, but I do not see a sincere engagement with the Writings from these Bahá'ís, but instead motivated reasoning. They want something to be true, and so they will bend the actual truth to ensure that epistemological outcome. Specifically, they want the current world order to be evil, and so it *must* be evil no matter what, and even if they must ignore and distort the available evidence, even when that evidence is their own scriptures.

The current world order has certainly been inconsistent at best, hypocritical at worst. However, what has happened in Ukraine has caused me to realize that what I believe, in the core of my being, is that Enlightenment values have brought this planet forward, and with much interrogation and renovation, will continue to do so. And while it is true that Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the future is not rooted in Enlightenment values, He is also not wholesale against everything those values have achieved. For example, He does say liberty is valid in "certain circumstances", such as, very importantly, membership in a religion. This is incredible, for what Bahá'u'lláh is doing is giving nothing less than divine sanction to the Enlightenment principle of freedom of conscience. Another example: the Writings quite consistently imply that key features of the current world order will either persist into the Bahá'í world order, such as the nation-state, or will serve as its preludes, such as the International Criminal Court, and these are all fruits of the Enlightenment. The Writings also discuss the possibility of rogue states that must be confronted by the international community, not unlike what much of the world, not only NATO, is attempting to do with Russia today. And finally, the Writings do enjoin Bahá'ís to turn to science to address their ailments and understand the universe.

Still, the Writings do contribute to the problem of motivated reasoning in their own way. For example, their hyperbolic style lends credence to viewing the present and future in dichotomous black-white terms, and Bahá'u'lláh almost certainly has a teleological understanding of freedom of conscience, such that when this freedom is properly exercised, it should inevitably lead back to Him, or at least another Manifestation of God in an older religion. The Writings also have historical inaccuracies, such as indicating that Socrates traveled to the Holy Land, and engage in conceptual shoehorning, such as categorizing the Buddha a Manifestation of God. Because the Writings are also supposed to be inerrant, little things like this add up over time to discourage critical reasoning; at best, they encourage constantly suspending it indefinitely, in the conviction that somehow such things "must" make sense. Once again, the objective as a Bahá'í is to transform oneself and build a new civilization; stopping to pause and reflect on these potential problems, much less on how one may actually be untruthful in what they hold to be true, is not genuinely part of the program.

9. Conclusion

No essay can capture the subtlety and elusiveness of something as difficult and evolving as the decision to join, persist in, or leave a religion. Additionally, because I am a philosopher, I have expressed myself here in an intellectual manner, which might give the wrong impression about the role played in my decision by logic. That wrong impression might tempt the ardent among the Friends to try to poke holes in what I have suggested here, not realizing that these written thoughts are themselves just a fragmented representation of the full scope of what has been happening inside me, just as it would be for anyone undertaking such a large change in their lives.

I have been very critical here, no, extremely critical, but I want to reiterate that while I no longer believe that the Bahá'í Faith is completely true, I also do not believe it is completely false. And to be clear: I do not believe a religion needs to be completely true in order to be true, but it does matter greatly how it relates to truth. The problem with the Bahá'í Writings is that they *want* to be completely true. Worse, the Faith has been built, scripturally and sociologically, in such a fashion that, at least for the foreseeable future, genuinely reckoning with its limitations and incompleteness will be extremely difficult. And I do not mean just acknowledging the many fallibilities of the Bahá'ís. The Friends always acknowledge these, but after a while doing so just becomes a way to hand-wave away the Faith's fallibility; it also contributes to the shame-driven pursuit of self-perfection.

If there is a way out from this trap, I would hazard to predict that it must lie in the Writing's own concept of progressive revelation, which impressed me deeply when I first encountered it in 2009 and still impresses me to this day. The concept presents all religion as a mix of perennial and historical elements, the latter being revisable under the inspiration or guidance of prophetic figures. The interesting thing, though, is that the perennial is also revisable, not in its essence, but in the exegetical frameworks and religious structures we craft to understand and channel it. This could mean that the Writings are revisable, although not literally; that option is foreclosed, and frankly, probably wisely so, as being able to actually alter the canon would lead to strife. I mean the exegetical spirit the Bahá'ís bring to the Writings can be revised, which would be in many respects tantamount to revising the scriptures. The idea I have here is how many Christians and Muslims accept the limitations and incompleteness of their scriptures, but they still believe that components of these texts, as well the traditions and mythologies surrounding them, remain truthful. So, I am not suggesting that Bahá'ís will one day start philosophizing about the Writings, but that they might engage more sincerely with what is actually vital and important in their scriptures, and might make hard decisions about what to prioritize.

I acknowledge that progressive revelation presents a cyclical view of religions, according to which they age and decay, until they are superseded by a new prophetic intervention. From this standpoint, religions like Christianity and Islam are undead zombies, precisely because they have needed to either ratchet up their commitment to the inerrancy of their scriptures, or commit to the arduous task of reconfiguring their exegetical frameworks so as to meet the needs and realities of a maturing planet. So, like many other things in the Faith, progressive revelation could end up harming Bahá'ís, for the

moment they might begin to think that they need to change their engagement with the Writings, they might also begin to feel anxiety that the religion is entering its death arc. Nevertheless, I know firsthand that thinkers like [Benjamin Schewel](#) have been developing robust understandings of progressive revelation, which gives me hope that the concept may end up empowering future believers to apply their reason to the Writings beyond the scope of implementation, and make the Faith flourish.

I have toyed with many scenarios that might compel a more realistic and healthier reinterpretation either in this vein or in a different way. Perhaps the Most Great Peace will come about and it will not be Bahá'í, but Christian, or Buddhist, or secular, or something else as-yet unimaginable; perhaps it may not come, at least not within the timespan prophesied in the scriptures; perhaps it is realized to be not even the kind of thing that ever should truly come, or that it is already here, and has always been here, within and around us. Or perhaps the Faith will succeed in achieving entry by troops, only to then be confronted with the challenges of success, as a tremendous plurality of personalities and cultures enter the community, and with them, radically different needs and understandings, such that the Bahá'ís will have no choice but to re-examine the spirit of their exegesis or risk falling into factions like the other religions. Or perhaps we will see the rise of a post-humanity or appearance of an extraterrestrial intelligences that forces Bahá'ís to choose between dogmatism or pragmatism. It could be something like these scenarios, or something else entirely.

Once more, I need to be careful about nuances here. It would be wrong of me to insist that, when and if such a revision comes to the Faith, that the Bahá'ís will necessarily agree with me on all the points I have raised here and will begin to reinterpret the Writings in a way consistent with my desires. According to the way in which I am beginning to understand God, it might even be good if they do *not* do this. The God I believe in only wants them to sincerely and truthfully engage their selves, their souls and their scriptures, and to cease with the shame, the self-avoidance, the obsessive focus on action, the motivated reasoning. If a sincere engagement leads them to conclusions far beyond what I can foresee or agree with, then it will be as God wills it.

To close, I want to note that there are many things about the Bahá'í framework that I still find impressive, sympathize with or agree with, either wholesale or in degrees, too many to get into here. And I will always be grateful to the Faith for many things, such as my friends among the Friends, and that the Faith gave me an internal structure, a discipline, especially in the difficult years between when I joined in 2009 and when I walked the Camino de Santiago in 2014. Indeed, I still occasionally perform the short obligatory prayer — I performed it while writing the first draft of this essay! — and I will say “Ya Bahá'u'l Abhá” to myself when there is good news or something exciting, and moreover, I have no intention to ever stop these little legacies of my time as a Bahá'í.

Another example: I will also always be grateful to the Faith for the way in which it helped me detach from the clashing cultural and political narratives of today, to take an eagle's eye view on everything happening right now. Because of the Bahá'í framework, I can see that there is really just a lot of fear, egotism and misshapen thinking masking itself as the Right, the Left, legal and philosophical

frameworks, and more. If, as many suspect, history will one day look back at this period as an inflection point, then I cannot overstate the value of the Faith's gift to me in terms of having greater precision and clarity of vision.

Finally, it bears repeating that so much of what is at stake here is perception and interpretation. With that in mind, and after everything is said and done, this much I feel in my bones to be true: I have changed, and I am not only permitted by the divine to change, but doing so is an expression of whatever mysterious purpose lies behind and within all of existence. And I do not believe that I have come to some new belief; rather, I feel as though I have come to grasp what I have always believed to be true since childhood and in the deepest parts of myself.

“Does not wisdom call out? Does not understanding raise her voice? At the highest point along the way, where the paths meet, she takes her stand; beside the gate leading into the city, at the entrance, she cries aloud: [...] ‘The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was formed long ages ago, at the very beginning, when the world came to be. [...] I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind. Now then, my children, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not disregard it. Blessed are those who listen to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For those who find me find life and receive favor from the Lord. But those who fail to find me harm themselves; all who hate me love death.’” — *Proverbs 8*