



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Progressive Revelation”

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### Centering Thoughts:

*Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.*--Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, Bishárát

*The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.*--Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i-Maqsúd

*The world is round so that friendship may encircle it.*--Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

### Sermon:

Progressive Revelation is one of the central principles of the Bahá'í Faith. This belief has two important positions,

1. That all major religions of the world are based on a divine revelation, conveyed by *Manifestations of God* (Messengers of God), and
2. the revelations brought by these Manifestations of God are not contradictory, but a continuous educational process for humanity.

### So, what is revelation?

The Bahá'í definition of revelation is unique, as Bahá'ís make a distinction between revelation (Arabic *vahí*)—which is bestowed by God to only a very small group of humans—and inspiration (Arabic *elhám*), which may come to anyone from various sources (God, departed souls, mind, ego, etc.). The recipients of revelation are the Manifestations of God, individuals to whom God has revealed an *entire system of spiritual, social, and ethical teachings*—in other words, founders of religions, such as Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh (the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith).

Bahá'ís also accept the Old Testament prophets—such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos—as recipients of inspiration, since it was a narrowly-focused revelation and not a complete spiritual, social, and ethical system. The Bahá'í writings note that the Manifestations receive their revelation "without an intermediary" while the other prophets "are followers and promoters . . . and are not independent "and of themselves they have no power and might, except what they receive from the independent Prophets" (*Some Answered Questions*, p. 164, 165).

Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that divine revelation has not been confined to only one period of history. Rather, "the Manifestations of His Divine Glory . . . have been sent down from time immemorial, and been commissioned to summon mankind to the one true God. That the names of some of them are forgotten and the records of their lives lost, is to be attributed to the disturbances and changes that have overtaken the world" (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 174).

This is important, because it makes it clear that there existed religions other than the ones we already know! So, it is reasonable to assume that divine Manifestations appeared to the Arab tribes, African, Chinese, Native American, and ancient Indo-European peoples as well. Also, nowhere in the Bahá'í writings does it indicate that Manifestations must be male. 'Abdu'l-Bahá (son of Baha'u'llah) says "in cycles gone by . . . continents remained widely divided, nay even among the people of one and the same continent association and interchange of thought were well-nigh impossible" (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 31). So it is possible to conclude that Manifestations of God may have lived simultaneously in different areas of the globe. So, there have been all these different revelations, what is their relationship? Let's talk about the progressive nature of revelation.

'Abdu'l-Bahá noted that "the world of existence is progressive. It is subject to development and growth" (*Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 378). We live in an ever-advancing and progressing civilization, and as such we continue to develop and progress, causing our social and spiritual needs at different times to also change. We believe that divine truth is one of the main causes for the progress of civilization. Each religion has two types of teachings, Spiritual and Social. The Bahá'í scriptures tell us that all revelations bring eternal and unchanging teachings; these are the spiritual teachings relating to one's relation to God; the nature of God and who He is; moral fundamentals such as doing unto others as one would have them do to oneself, or not to kill, not to lie, etc. These core fundamentals of the religions are the same in all of them. Religions also bring social teachings that are suited to their own time and place of revelation. For example, when the Israelites were told not to eat pork in the Old Testament, it made perfect sense at the time. In those days they were not able to cure the ham to protect them from the diseases that eating pork could cause, so for their own health and wellbeing, God made it forbidden to eat that meat; but now with the advancement of science, these diseases are no longer an issue, and there is no reason not to eat ham, unless you are a vegetarian, or have other objections to eating animals!

So, what are the **relationships between the different religions?**

Let's look at humanity like children; as they go to preschool they learn the numbers and the alphabet. Then they are ready for the next grade, where they learn how to read and write sentences, add and subtract, and as they go through different grades in school, they keep on learning to use what they learned previously and build upon that, and continue . . . This is not an indication that the teachers of lower grades were not as knowledgeable or incapable of teaching their students more, rather it indicates that as children keep growing up so do their learning capacities. Eventually they are ready and capable to learn calculus and higher math, physics, chemistry . . . simply because the teachers they had before taught them the building blocks they needed to be ready for these classes. Humanity is the same, we practiced the revelations of the time and as such our spiritual capacity and receptivity grew to where we are now, at the threshold of maturation of humanity. We are able to understand and grasp more advanced, timely and complex revelations; teachings like the equality of sexes, organization of a planetary civilization, world peace, etc. 'Abdu'l-Bahá more eloquently states, "All humankind are as children in a school, and the Dawning-Points of Light, the Sources of divine revelation, are the teachers, wondrous and without peer. In the school of realities they educate these sons and daughters, according to teachings from God . . . so that they may develop along every line, show forth the excellent gifts and blessings of the Lord, and combine human perfections; that they may advance in all aspects of human endeavor, whether outward or inward, hidden or visible, material or spiritual, until they make of this mortal world a widespread mirror, to reflect that other world

which dieth not” (*Selections From the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 128*). Humanity is maturing more. Looking at how the events of our time are taking place around us, it is hard to accept that we have matured at all, but like teenagers during the time of their maturation, humanity is also experiencing a volatile time. But we have been promised that the future is much brighter and peaceful. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, said: “Rest ye assured that this darkness shall be dispelled and these impenetrable clouds which have darkened the horizon shall be scattered, and the Sun of Reality shall appear in its full splendour. Its rays shall melt the icebergs of hatred and differences which have transformed the moving sea of humanity into hard frozen immensity. The vices of the world of nature shall be changed into praise-worthy attributes, and the lights of the excellences of the Divine realm shall appear” (*Selections from Bahá’í Scripture, p. 179*).

We believe that Baha’u’llah is the latest of these Teachers (or Manifestations) sent by God, but in no way the last! He cannot be the last as God has promised us through every one of His Messengers, that He will not leave us alone and on our own! The Bahá’í scriptures state that each revelation builds on the previous revelation, and in turn becomes the foundation for a subsequent revelation. In ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words: “God leaves not His children comfortless, but, when the darkness of winter overshadows them, then again He sends His Messengers, the Prophets, with a renewal of the blessed spring. The Sun of Truth appears again on the horizon of the world shining into the eyes of those who sleep, awaking them to behold the glory of a new dawn” (*Paris Talks, p. 32*).

Why are there apparent discrepancies and contradictions between the religions?

First, we need to acknowledge that human interpretation is different for each individual. These interpretations over time have caused differences. For example, the Muslims and Christians have different interpretations about the Crucifixion. Muslims say that Jesus was not crucified, but rather was a man looking like him. {*Quran 4:156-8*: (“And [for] their saying, ‘Indeed, we have killed the Messiah, Jesus, the son of Mary, the messenger of Allah.’ And they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him; but was made to resemble him to them . . . And they did not kill him, for certain. Rather, Allah raised him to Himself. And ever is Allah Exalted in Might and Wise.”)} But Bahá’ís interpret this passage to mean, that the “spiritual reality” of Jesus was beyond crucifixion but that His body didn’t escape such a fate.

Second, understand that some aspects of the revelations are temporal. As an example, what we discussed earlier, that at first God forbids us to consume ham, and then later as science matures and removes the obstacles faced before, He allows us to eat it. Or equality of the sexes, in early dispensations either there was nothing about rights of woman, or in Islam every two women were given the rights of one man. This was an advancement for the time when female infants born were buried in sand. We are now matured enough to accept and demand this equality. There are many other teachings, such as the agreement of science and religion, that now seem reasonable, understandable and acceptable, due to our spiritual and scientific advancement.

Third, is the inadequacy of the historical records and transmission of the original teachings. The Holy Books of religions of the past are not literal records of divine revelations and were later collected and transcribed. For example, the four gospels give different accounts of Jesus’ life, and at times, they look contradictory. That is simply because they were collected and written down much later. We must remember that the Bible has been translated many times from Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek, and numerous other languages. Each translation leaves room for some changes

and variations. Also, the Bible is attributed to many different authors over centuries. Each writer wrote with a different style, from a different perspective, to a different audience, for a different purpose. The earliest accounts were handed down from generation to generation in songs, narratives, and poetry, before they were finally collected and written down. These all are reasonable points in accepting any inaccuracies in inscription of some events and parables, and in no way do they take away from the divine truth represented.

Let me end with a quote from 'Abdu'l-Bahá, something for us all to reflect on and ponder:

*“Religion should unite all hearts and cause wars and disputes to vanish from the face of the earth, give birth to spirituality, and bring life and light to each heart. If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred, division, it were better to be without it . . .” (Paris Talks, p. 130).*

Thank you for allowing me to share the Bahá'í view on this subject.

**Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. How have different spiritual traditions influenced you over time?
2. What events caused truths previously unknown to be revealed to you?
3. Where and how do you feel the divine, the universe speaking to you?