

A Bahá'í Approach to the Claim of Finality in Islam

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Abstract

Because it precludes the acceptance of Messengers of God after the Islamic dispensation, the concept of the finality of prophethood (*khatm al-nubuwwa*) is the major theological barrier between the Bahá'í Faith and Islam. This article surveys the philological, theological, and historical interpretations of the terms Prophet and Seal, and offers an approach based upon the Bahá'í writings to their meaning that reconciles the “Seal of the Prophets” doctrine with progressive revelation. In addition the related problem of the finality of Islam is analyzed. The article argues the need for a multiplicity of interpretive methods in addressing problems of religious pluralism.

The concept of the finality of prophethood (*khatm al-nubuwwa*), the belief that Muhammad was the last of God's prophets sent to humanity, is fundamental to contemporary Muslim belief. Muslims accept the Qur'án as absolute truth that prescribes a set of laws operative and incumbent upon humanity for all eternity. Muslim theology therefore asserts that Islam contains all humankind will ever require until the Day of Judgment and that no further revelation of the divine purpose can or will occur—Islam is the final and perfect religion. These beliefs have two important consequences for Bahá'ís.

First, the belief in finality is the central theological justification for the opposition and persecution of Bahá'ís living in some Islamic countries because the acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith by Muslims is considered an act of apostasy (*ridda*).² “This last point is the single most important issue that completely separates the Islamic and the Bahá'í viewpoints” (Moayyad, *Historical* 78). Even in Islamic countries that have not punished apostasy by death, this difference between the Bahá'í Faith and Islam has nevertheless had far-reaching civil implications. One notable historical case is the dissolution of marriage contracts in 1925 between Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís by the appellate religious court in Egypt.³

The social effects of this issue have been further highlighted in a series of interviews with Iranian Bahá'ís and Muslims that were intended to investigate the reasons for prejudice and discrimination against Bahá'ís in Iran. This study concluded “the issue of Muhammad's being considered by Muslims as the ‘Seal of the Prophets’ to be extremely important in explaining the hostility of Muslims toward the Bahá'í Faith” (Robinson, *Prejudice* 35).

In addition, anti-Bahá'í polemical works regularly revert to the consequences of rejecting Islam's claim to finality. One of these, for instance, states at the outset:

[B]elief in the finality of prophethood of Muhammad is crucial and definite, in the same way as is the faith in the Oneness of God or belief in the hereafter. Anyone who denies these truths cannot be considered a Muslim. Similarly anyone who claims to be prophet, or who tries to promulgate a new law is an apostate and a liar. (Noon, *Finality* 1)

Second, insistence on the Islamic belief in finality could be seen more generally to question the fundamental Bahá'í principle of the underlying oneness and progressiveness of religious truth. Indeed, this question has been noted by Huston Smith in *The Religions of Man*, his introductory textbook to comparative religion. Although he sympathizes with the vision of a “universal religion embedded in the heart of each of the world's great existing religions” (*Religions* 352), which teaching he associates with the Bahá'í Faith, he argues that a number of serious questions need to be raised before students of religion can accept this concept of religious unity. Smith asks how Bahá'ís resolve the seemingly irreconcilable theological differences between the religions. Seen in this panoramic

¹ The authors are grateful to Dr. Juan Ricardo Cole for his comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² See Qur'án 2:217.

³ The court concluded its pronouncement by stating that these contracts were renewable if the Bahá'í husbands would testify to their belief in the finality of Islam: “If any one of them (husbands) repents, believes in, and acknowledges whatsoever... Muhammad, the Apostle of God...has brought from God...and returns to the august Faith of Islam...and testifies that . . . Muhammad . . . is the Seal of the Prophets and Messengers, that no religion will succeed His religion, that no law will abrogate His law, that the Qur'án is the last of the Books of God and His last Revelation to His Prophets and His Messengers . . . he shall be accepted and shall be entitled to renew his marriage contract” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 365–66).

perspective, this is a valid point insofar as it seems to challenge the fundamental premise of the Bahá'í Faith that the world religions come from one source and are essentially one. Among Smith's pertinent questions are:

How fully has the proponent tried and succeeded in understanding Christianity's claim that Christ was the *only* begotten Son of God, or the Muslim's claim that Muhammad is the *Seal* of the Prophets, or the Jews' sense of their being the Chosen People? (*Religions* 352)⁴

It is the second of these questions that this article will explore.⁵

Islam and Finality

The idea of *khatm al-nubuwwa* (finality of prophethood) derives from Qur'án 33:40, which states that, "Muhammad is not the father of any one of your men, but the Messenger of God (*rasúl' u'lláhh*), and the Seal of the Prophets (*khátam al-nabíyyín*)"⁶ According to most commentators, the meaning of *khátam* here is "last." For instance, Yusuf 'Alí, whose translation and commentary of the Qur'án has become a standard for Sunni Muslims worldwide, presents the contemporary interpretation of this verse:

When a document is sealed, it is complete, and there can be no further addition. The Holy Prophet Muhammad closed the long line of Messengers. Allah's teaching is and will always be continuous, but there has been and will be no Prophet after Muhammad. The later ages will want thinkers and reformers, not Prophets. This is not an arbitrary matter. (*Holy Qur'án* 1069, fn. 3731)

Muslims have referred to *hadíth* literature in such discussions that have, in their view, corroborated this understanding of Qur'án 33:40. Thus:

O 'Alí, to me you are what Aaron was to Moses except that there will be no prophet [nabí] after me. (*Concordance* 6:335)

God sent Muhammad at a time when for a long time no prophet had appeared, and people were suffering from religious differences and squabbles; God terminated [*khatama bihi al-wahy*] the institution of Prophethood with Prophet Muhammad. (Imám 'Alí, "Nahj al-Balághah," quoted in Noon, *Finality* 5)

Further, a frequently cited tradition describes how the prophet compared the relationship between himself and the prophets who preceded him to a man who had almost finished the construction of a beautiful house, leaving a space for only one brick at a corner. People started to walk around it, admiring it and asking why the last brick had not been put in the space. The prophet said, "I am that brick and I am the seal of the prophets (*khátam al-nabíyyín*)" (Al-Bukhárí, *Sahíh* 18). As Friedmann, whose thesis deals in detail with this question, explains, "Here the Prophet is described as completing, perfecting, and putting the final touch on the sumptuous structure of religion, which had gradually been erected, but not completed, by his predecessors in the prophetic office" (*Prophecy* 54).

Islamic belief in finality also rests on the interpretation of a number of verses in the Qur'án that indicate that Islam is perfect and complete:

The true religion with God is Islam. (3:17)

Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him (3:79)

This day have I perfected your religion for you, and have fitted up the measure of my favours upon you: and it is my pleasure that Islam be your religion (5:5; Rodwell, *Koran* 486)

He it is who hath sent His Apostle with the Guidance and a religion of the truth, that He may make it victorious over every other religion (9:33; Rodwell, *Koran* 474)

The conjunction of these two themes, i.e., Muhammad as the last prophet and Islam as the final religion, has resulted in crystallizing an attitude of finality and exclusivism, which, in turn, reflects a common propensity of most

⁴ Cf. St. John's Gospel 3:16, Qur'án 33:40, and Isaiah 43:8.

⁵ See Fazel and Fananapazir, "A Bahá'í Approach to the Claim of Exclusivity and Uniqueness in Christianity" and Cole's "Christian Muslim Encounter" for a discussion of the first question.

⁶ All quotations from the Qur'án are from Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* unless otherwise indicated.

religious traditions. This article endeavors to provide the basis of a new framework reconciling the Bahá'í belief that Manifestations of God have appeared, in the persons of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and will continue to appear “till ‘the end that hath no end’” (Bahá'u'lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 116) with the time-honored Islamic doctrines of *khatm al-nubuwwa* (finality of prophethood) and Islam as the final divinely revealed religion. To put the Bahá'í interpretation of this idea in its proper perspective, a brief explanation of the Bahá'í Faith's teachings in regard to Muhammad and the Qur'án is necessary.

The Bahá'í writings wholeheartedly accept the Qur'án “as an absolutely authenticated Repository of the Word of God,” which should be approached “reverently” and studied “with a mind purged from preconceived ideas (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 49). Shoghi Effendi explains that “Islam, or its Prophet, or His Book” have not been “or are to be in any way, or to however slight a degree, disparaged” (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 108) in Bahá'í literature. Indeed, Muhammad is called the “Apostle of God” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 76), the “Seal of the Prophets” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 42),⁷ and the “Day-star of Truth” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 111) among other exalted attributes, and Bahá'u'lláh makes the following tribute to the transforming power of the prophet's influence:

Reflect for a while upon the behaviour of the companions of the Muhammadan Dispensation. Consider how, through the reviving breath of Muhammad, they were cleansed from the defilements of earthly vanities, were delivered from selfish desires, and were detached from all else but Him. Behold how they preceded all the peoples of the earth in attaining unto His holy Presence—the *Presence of God Himself*—how they renounced the world and all that is therein, and sacrificed freely and joyously their lives at the feet of that Manifestation of the All-Glorious. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 159–60, emphasis added)

Since there is no question as to the authenticity of the verse Qur'án 33:40, the challenge, therefore, is to reconcile the Bahá'í position of the continuity of divine revelation after Muhammad with the commonly understood meaning of Muhammad as the “Seal of the Prophets.” A starting point, we suggest, is a rational and balanced textual analysis of the quranic use of the words Prophets and Seal.

The Founder of Islam as *Nabí*

Two different words are used in the Qur'án for the messenger of God: prophet (*nabí*)⁸ and apostle/messenger (*rasúl*).⁹ The word *prophet* is used on seventy-five occasions, while *apostle* occurs 331 times. Most Muslims use these words interchangeably as indicated by the usual rendering of the *shahada*,¹⁰ as if it would be the confession that “there is no God but Allah and that Muhammad is His Prophet,” whereas the Arabic title of Muhammad here is *rasúl'u'lláh* (God's apostle/messenger).

The discussion on the use of the terms *prophet* and *apostle* has been conducted for over fifty years by several Orientalists. In 1924, Wensinck defended the thesis that there is a distinction between prophet and apostle in the Qur'án:

According to Muhammad's view the Apostle stands as founder and leader at the beginning of a series formed by his representatives, the prophets. (*Muhammed* 172)

Horowitz, agreeing with Wensinck insofar as the two words have distinctive meanings, rejects the above difference because Abraham is not referred to as an apostle in the Qur'an, but only as a prophet. He suggested that *nabí* (prophet) is used mostly, though not exclusively, for biblical prophets, and, along with *rasúl* (messenger), for Muhammad himself during the Medina period (*Nabí* 802). Bell (*Introduction* 147) and Jeffrey both argue that the words are synonymous. For instance, Jeffrey concludes: “Apparently he [Muhammad] made no special distinction between the two names *rasúl* and *nabí*” (*Qur'án* 27).

In this article, we suggest that there are four reasons why the two words have distinctly different applications in the Qur'án:

(1) The Chronological Order in Which “Prophet” and “Apostle” are Used

Muhammad is not referred to as a prophet in the Meccan period, whereas this title is applied to him approximately thirty times in Medina. As Bijlefeld elaborates, “When we, moreover, realize that in the Meccan period the *rasúl*

⁷ Also see Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 162, 169; *Epistle* 41.

⁸ Plural = *nabíyyún* (nominative) or *nabíyyín* (genitive) or *anbiyá'*.

⁹ Plural = *rusul*, and *mursalin* (the latter word literally means “those that are sent,” which Arberry translates as “envoys”).

¹⁰ The Muslim testimony of belief.

(messenger) title is applied to Muhammad fourteen times, it becomes indeed very difficult to accept the view that the terms ‘prophet’ and ‘apostle’ are fully interchangeable” (*Prophet* 16).

The reasons for this shift in emphasis are unclear. Bijlefeld argues that in the pre-Hijira period, the intention was to stress the idea of an apostle sent by God to his own community with the very same message which other apostles and communities had received in the past. The use of the prophet title in the post-Hijira period, in contrast, coincided with the need to place a greater emphasis on the Arabs’ descentance from Abraham (Bijlefeld, *Prophet* 23–24) and thus to position Muhammad in the Abrahamic (Semitic) tradition of prophethood.

(2) The Individuals Who are Called Prophets and Apostles

Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Enoch, Ezra, Job, Jonah, Ezekiel, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Muhammad are the persons to whom the Qur’án directly applies the title “prophet.” If we include indirect references as well, Elisha, Elijah, Lot, Joseph, and Zechariah can be added because there is a verse that lists them with several of the aforementioned prophets, and concludes: “Those are they to whom We gave Scripture, the Judgement and Prophethood [*nubuwwat*]” (6:83–89).

The list of apostles is Noah, Lot, Ishmael, Moses (twice with Aaron), Jesus, Húd, Sálìh, Jethro and Muhammad. If here we include those referred to as *mursalún*,¹¹ we can add Elijah and Joseph.

Preliminary conclusions can be drawn from these lists of prophets and apostles. There is the impression of a distinction between *nabí* (prophet) and *rasúl* (messenger), which is further confirmed as the prophets are exclusively among the descendants of Abraham, while the list of apostles includes three apparently sent to other communities (Húd, Sálìh, Jethro). It is also clear that not all the prophets are called apostles, therefore strongly supporting the view that not every prophet is an apostle. In addition, the contrary hypothesis [that not every apostle is a prophet can be justifiably concluded as Húd, Sálìh, and Jethro are not given the prophetic title. Even more significant is the suggestion, explicitly expressed in a few texts,¹² that there have been many more apostles than those whose names have been revealed in the Qur’án.¹³ Interestingly, Parrinder’s view is that the title *nabí* (prophet) refers to a succession of prophets that have come to the “prophetic religions”—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—while every people has its apostle, which have also come to the Indian and Far Eastern religions—the “Wisdom religions” (*Jesus* 43).

(3) The Qualities and Functions of Prophets and Apostles in their Quranic Context

As previously mentioned, prophethood is within the heritage of Abraham and his descendants, and also seems to be closely associated with the Scripture brought by them:¹⁴

We appointed the Prophecy [*nubuwwah*] and the Book to be among his *seed* [*dhurríyyah*] ... (29:26, emphasis added)

We gave the *Children* of Israel the Book, the Judgment, and the Prophethood. (45:15, emphasis added)

Moreover the Qur’án states that several prophets are linked with specific sacred texts: Abraham with the *suhuf* (scrolls), Moses with the Torah, David with the Psalms, Jesus with the Gospels, and Muhammad with the Qur’án itself. In addition, a common feature of the prophets is that they are part of God’s Covenant:

Remember we took from the prophets [*nabíyyín*] their Covenant [*mítháq*]. (33:7; Yusuf ‘Alí, *Holy Qur’án* 1057)

When God entered into covenant [*mítháq*] with the prophets [*nabíyyín*], he said, “This is the Book and the Wisdom which I give you. Hereafter shall a prophet [*rasúl*] come [*sic*] unto you to confirm the

¹¹ Meaning “those whom We [God] sent”—a word based on the same root as *rasúl* (messenger).

¹² “We sent Messengers before thee; of them there are some whose story we have related to thee” (40:78); see also 4:164.

¹³ This would argue against the formula tentatively suggested in Wensinck’s article in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, which stated that “the apostle is at the same time a prophet, but the prophet is not necessarily at the same time an apostle” (s.v. *Rasúl* 1127). It is interesting that the suggestion that there have been many more apostles than prophets and that they have fulfilled different functions is implied in the following statement of Bahá’u’lláh as translated by Shoghi Effendi: “But for Him no Divine Messenger would have been *invested with the robe of prophethood*” (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order* 104, emphasis added).

¹⁴ This argues against the article in *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, which distinguishes between *nabí* (prophet) and *rasúl* (messenger) partly on the fact that a *rasúl* is a Messenger endowed by God with a Book and laws (*Prophets* 318).

Scriptures already with you. Ye shall surely believe on him, and ye shall surely aid him.” (3:75; Rodwell, *Koran* 394)

The term *apostle* also has specific associations. First there is the quranic assertion that “every community [*umma*] has its (own) messenger [*rasúl*]” (10:47, 16:38, 17:15, 23:44, 30:47) who acts as his community’s representative with God. More important, he is also God’s representative to his people, and in this context he has a unique authority. People are called to listen to, believe in, and obey God and God’s apostle. Indeed the words *obey–obedience* [*atá’a*], *disobey–disobedience* are used twenty-eight times in connection with the *rasúl* (messenger), but not one single time with *nabí* (prophet). A further feature is that the apostle is the bearer of a “manifest” message: “it is only for the Messenger [*rasúl*] to deliver the Manifest Message” (29:18).¹⁵

(4) Future Messengers

Finally, a significant difference that has been identified by Bahá’í writers between prophets and apostles is the reference of Qur’án 7:34. This verse appears to promise the coming of apostles in the future:

O Children of Adam! there shall come to you Apostles from among yourselves, rehearsing my signs to you.... (Rodwell, *Koran* 296)

However, Muslim commentators and most later Western translators have rendered the verb in the verse, “there shall come to you,” as part of a conditional clause, arguing that “the use of the energetic *ya’ tiyannakum* serves the purpose of strengthening the conditional meaning. Thus, Yusuf ‘Alí translates the phrase as, ‘Whenever there come to you Apostles’ [*Holy Qur’án* 349], and Arberry’s rendering is, ‘If there should come to you Messengers’ [*Koran Interpreted* 146]” (Moayyad, *Historical* 79). There are two *prima facie* objections to a conditional meaning. The first is based on the Arabic of the verb “shall come to you” in Qur’án 7:34, which transliterates as *Immá ya’ tíyannakum*. This form of the trilateral root A.T.Y. is the imperfect active form (*mudári’*), indicating action in the future (Kassis, *Concordance* xxviii), suffixed by *yanna*, which puts the verb in an energetic mode. This form of the verb also occurs in Qur’án 2:38, which more accurately is rendered, “yet there shall come to you guidance from Me....”¹⁶ The second objection to the conditional translation of *ya’ tíyannakum* is that these modern translations of Qur’án 7:34 lead to a logically inconsistent position, for they indicate here that God has provided for the possibility of future apostles appearing to humanity when elsewhere, as in Qur’án 33:40, such a possibility is categorically excluded (Moayyad, *Historical* 80).

Other objections to the conditional meaning of this verse rest on the understanding that a number of indications given in the Qur’án suggest the Islamic Dispensation has a finite time:

To every nation [*ajal*] a term; when their term comes they shall not put it back by a single hour nor put it forward. (7:33)

To each age [*ajal*] its Book. (13:38)¹⁷

Neither too soon, nor too late, shall a people reach its appointed time. . . . (23:43; Rodwell, *Koran* 147)

Moreover the Qur’án condemns the attitude of those who believe that, after the passing of an apostle, no other apostles will be sent by God, and who mock the claimant of a new revelation:

Moreover, Joseph had come to you before with clear tokens, but ye ceased not to doubt of the message with which he came to you, until when he died, ye said, ‘God will by no means raise up an apostle [*rasúl*] after him.’ Thus God misleadeth him who is the transgressor, the doubter. (40:34)¹⁸

No apostle [*rasúl*] cometh to them but they laugh him to scorn. (36:29; Rodwell, *Koran* 131)

¹⁵ Cf. Qur’án 24:54, 36:17, 5:92, 16:35.

¹⁶ It also occurs in Qur’án 20:122, which Rodwell translates as, “Hereafter shall guidance come unto you from me (*Koran* 101).

¹⁷ Rodwell, *Koran* 337. Arberry renders it, “Every term has a Book” (*Koran Interpreted* 244). The implication here is that every dispensation has its own Book.

¹⁸ Rodwell, *Koran* 2423. This verse is quoted by Bahá’u’lláh in *Súriy-i-Sabr* (*Má’dih* 291), a tablet devoted largely to the exposition of the theme of progressive revelation.

In summary, there are four major reasons why the words *prophet* and *apostle* have distinctly different applications in the Qur'án. First is that *prophet* and *apostle* are used at distinct periods in Muhammad's ministry. Second, the individuals to whom these titles apply are different. Third, the terms are used in different contexts, which identify unique features of the particular historical mission of prophets and apostles.¹⁹ Fourth, there appears to be a promise of future apostles.

Bahá'í writers have used the distinction between prophet and apostle—a distinction, which, although helpful, is often presented in a simplistic manner.²⁰ This distinction provides a way of explaining that, although Muhammad was the last prophet, the Qur'án allows the possibility of future apostles to appear to humanity—the prophet of Islam was not the last *rasúl* (messenger). However, this argument has been criticized in certain anti-Bahá'í polemical literature. Among the criticisms repeatedly stated is that this distinction may have some validity for the prophets and apostles *before* Muhammad's coming, but with his coming it was rendered irrelevant because, with him, both prophethood and apostleship were closed (Amirpour, *Khátimíyyat* 96). In support, there is the hadíth:

The prophethood and the institutions of Divine Messengers has come to an end with me; there will be after me neither any messenger nor any apostle [*rasúl*] or any prophet [*nabí*]. (Quoted in Noori, *Finality* 4)

Further, this polemical literature points to the apparent contradiction in the Bahá'í position in that Bahá'u'lláh, in some of his later writings, affirms that Muhammad did indeed close prophethood and messengership (Najafi, *Bahá'iyán* 436). We shall discuss this problem in a later section.

Another approach to *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) is to study the *sitz im leben* of Qur'án 33:40. Such a study would indicate that the context is the alleged paternity of the prophet in relation to Zayd ibn Hárithah, who was the adopted son of Muhammad. Qur'án 33:20–40 is a depiction of Zayd's life and marriage to Zaynab. At the culmination of this story, the verse of 33:40 states that Muhammad was not the father of Zayd or “any man amongst you,” thereby excluding the assumption after Muhammad of prophethood [*nubuwwa*] by inheritance and primogeniture. This, as indicated above, was the characteristic of the Abrahamic line of prophethood.²¹ Lings argues that the force of the verse is the paternity of Muhammad rather than the termination of revelation:

The verses also said that in future adopted sons should not be named after their fathers who begot them; and from that day Zayd was known as Zayd ibn Hárithah instead of Zayd ibn Muhammad, as he had been called ever since his adoption some thirty-five years previously. But this change did not annul his adoption as such, nor did it affect in any way the love and the intimacy between the adopter and the adopted, who were now nearing their sixtieth and fiftieth years. It was merely a reminder that there was no blood relationship; and in this sense Revelation continued: *Muhammad is not the father of any man amongst you, but he is the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets.* (Lings, *Muhammad* 213–14)

The Founder of Islam as *Khátam*

As indicated earlier, many traditions exist that take the phrase *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) to mean “the last prophet.” However, the completion of some activity is only one meaning of “seal.” The historical use of this word provides other interpretations. Sealing may also be a guarantee of authenticity or a device designed to prevent the unauthorized opening of a receptacle without knowledge of the owner. In pre-Muslim Arabia, seals were used in place of a signature, giving validity to a document. They were also used as a guarantee that property was kept intact and thus took the place of locks and keys. The possession of another person's seal was evidence that the latter had delegated authority to another. Pharaoh, for example, gave Joseph his signet as a sign of authority (Gen. 41:42). Jezebel forged a letter in Ahab's name and sealed it with Ahab's seal to give it validity (1 Kings 21:8). Tradition has a certain amount to say about Muhammad's *khátam* (seal). For instance, Al-Bukhari recounts that the prophet wished to write to the Byzantines and was told that it would not be read unless it had a seal on it. He therefore adopted a silver seal with the inscription “Muhammad rasul Allah” at the year 7 A.H. (Allan, “Khátam” 1103).

The expression *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) is found in several places in classical Arabic poetry. A verse in the *Díwán* of Umayya b. Abi al-Salt speaks of the prophet as the one “by means of whom God

¹⁹ For a Shaykhí perspective on this subject, see Rafati, “Development” 102.

²⁰ See Mustafa, *Bahá'u'lláh* 23–26 and *Some Notes* 6–7.

²¹ However, this verse did not preclude the existence of the Imamate (within Shi'ism) and the Caliphate (within Sunni Islam).

sealed [*khātama*] the prophets [*nabíyyín*] before him and after him” (Friedmann, *Prophecy* 57). This verse implies the appearance of prophets after Muhammad, so that the verb *khātama* here cannot be understood to mean the termination of something. Friedmann suggests the possibility that it means “he stamped upon them his seal [of approval]” (*Prophecy* 57). This idea that the prophet came to confirm the former prophets is supported by Qur’án 37:37: “He cometh with truth and confirmeth the Sent Ones [*mursalín*] of old” (Rodwell, *Koran* 80).

There are other indications that the belief in the finality of Muhammad’s prophethood was not generally accepted in the early days of Islam. In a gloss explaining the expression of *khayr al-khawátim* (the best of the seals) used in the *Naqá’id*, the commentator Abú ‘Ubayda who died in 209 A.H. says, “He [the poet] means that the Prophet . . . is the seal of the prophets, which means he is the best of the prophets” (*Naqá’id* 349). A similar interpretation is given by Abú Riyásh al-Qaysí in his commentary on al-Kumayt’s *Háshimiyyat*. Commenting on a verse in which the prophet is referred to as *khátam* (or *khátim*) *al-anbiyá’*, Abú Riyásh says that the meaning of *khátim al-anbiyá’* is someone who seals the prophets; *khátam al-anbiyá’*, however, means “beauty of the prophets” or “the best of them” (Friedmann, *Prophecy* 57). Another explicit tradition that supports this idea is attributed to ‘Á’isha, who said, “Say [that the Prophet is] the seal of the prophets and do not say that there is no prophet after him” (Al-Suyúti, quoted in Friedmann, *Prophecy* 63). The phrase *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) here cannot mean “the last prophet” but is understandable in the sense of the best prophet. Also, al-Tha’lad, the foremost Kúfi grammarian, held that “*al-khátim* is the one who sealed the prophets and *al-khátám* is the best of the prophets in character and physical constitution” (Al-‘Ayní, quoted in Friedmann, *Prophecy* 58).

These doxological²² interpretations of *seal* seem to indicate that even in the third century of Islam there still existed different interpretations of *khátam al-anbiyá’* (seal of the prophets). These interpretations also found their way into hadíth literature. For instance, there is a saying of the Imám ‘Alí that “Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets [*khátam al-anbiyá’*] and I am the Seal of the Successors [*khátam al-wasíyyín*]” (Majlisí, *Bihár* 4–5).²³ If *seal* solely meant termination, then how can one understand ‘Alí as sealing the successorship, when there were to be eleven Imams after him according to Shí‘í belief, and the Caliphate was to continue after him in the history of Sunni Islam? Also, one Bahá’í writer discusses the implications of a hadíth in which the prophet is reported to have said, “I am the last prophet and the mosque I am constructing is the last mosque.” Rawshání argues that if by the term “last mosque” is understood that no other mosque will be built in the dispensation of Islam, then clearly this is an absurd contradiction, unless the term was used in a doxological manner. On this ground the term *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) refers to the fact that the prophet confirmed the preceding prophets, and thus the peoples of Arabia, who had not accepted the prophethood of the prophets of the past, particularly those of the Abrahamic tradition, were summoned to recognize them (Rawshání, *Khátamiyyat* 30–31). Moreover, there are variant meanings of *seal* suggested in the Qur’án; one verse states that on the Day of God a “choice” wine will quench the thirst of the Righteous, “whose seal [*khítám*] is musk” (83:26).

In summary, there is cogent evidence to suggest that the word *khátam* (seal) did not mean “the last” in a temporal sense to early Muslims. There are instances in classical Arabic poetry and hadíth literature to suggest that the word *khátam* (seal) was used to mean “the one who confirmed” (the prophets of the past) and was understood in a honorific way as “the best” (of the prophets).

The Founder of Islam as *Eschaton*

The predominant explanation of *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) in Bahá’í literature has focussed on the belief that Bahá’u’lláh is the fulfillment of the quranic eschatology.²⁴ In this perspective, Muhammad is the last prophet prior to the Last Day, rather than the last prophet in a temporal sense. One collection of quranic sources for this belief is provided in Shoghi Effendi’s *God Passes By*:

To Him [Bahá’u’lláh] Muhammad, the Apostle of God, had alluded in His Book as the “*Great Announcement*” [Qur’án 38:67, 78:2], and declared His Day to be the Day whereon “*God*” will “*come down*” “*overshadowed with clouds*” [2:210], the Day whereon “*thy Lord shall come and the angels rank on rank*” [89:22], and “*The Spirit shall arise and the angels shall be ranged in order*” [78:38]. His advent He, in that Book, in a súrîh said to have been termed by Him “*the heart of the Qur’án*” had

²² Doxology pertains to the glory and praise of God or God’s Manifestation.

²³ A related hadíth is from Muhammad: “I am the Seal of the Prophets and My mosque is the seal and last mosque [*masjidi hádhá ákhir al-masájid*]” (quoted in Amirpour, *Khátamiyyat* 102). *Seal* cannot only mean final in this context as this was obviously not the last mosque that was built. Rather it describes the honor and uniqueness of the prophet’s mosque.

²⁴ Eschatology (from the Gk. *eschaton*, meaning last) refers to the “doctrine of the last things” and concerns the ultimate fulfillment of God’s purposes for creation.

foreshadowed as that of the “*third*” Messenger, sent down to “*strengthen*” the two who preceded Him [36: 14]. To His Day He, in the pages of that same Book, had paid a glowing tribute, glorifying it as the “*Great Day*” [83:5], the “*Last Day*,”²⁵ the “*Day of God*” [14:5, 30:43, 45:14], the “*Day of Judgment*” [1:4], the “*Day of Reckoning*” [38:16, 26, 53], the “*Day of Mutual Deceit*” [64:9], the “*Do of Severing*” 37:2t, 42:21, 44:40, 78:17], the “*Day of Sighing*” [19:39], the “*Day of Meeting*” [40:15], the Day “*when the Decree shall be accomplished*” [10:54], the Day whereon the second “*Trumpet blast*” [39:68] will be sounded, the “*Day when mankind shall stand before the Lord of the world*” [83:6], and “*all shall come to Him in humble guise*” [45:28], the Day when “*thou shalt see the mountains, which thou thinkest so firm, pass away with the passing of a cloud*” [27:88], the Day “*wherein account shall be taken,*” “*the approaching Day, when men’s hearts shall rise up, choking them, into their throats*” [40:18], the Day when “*all that are in the heavens and all that are on the earth shall be terror-stricken, save him whom God pleaseth to deliver*” [27:87, 89], the Day whereon “*every suckling woman shall forsake her sucking babe, and every woman that hath a burden in her womb, shall cast her burden*” [22:2], the Day “*when the earth shall shine with the light of her Lord, and the Book shall be set, and the Prophets shall be brought up, and the witnesses; and judgment shall be given between them with equity; and none shall be wronged*” [39:68]. (God Passes By 96, quranic references added)

Significantly, Bahá’u’lláh eschatologically links the “Seal of the Prophets” theme to the coming of the day of God:

On this day the blessed words “But He is the Apostle of God, and the Seal of the Prophets” have found their consummation in the verse “The day when mankind shall stand before the Lord of the worlds.” (Epistle 114; Qur’án 83:6)

This Day, however, is unique, and is to be distinguished from those that have preceded it. The designation “Seal of the Prophets” fully revealeth its high station. The Prophetic Cycle hath, verily, ended. The Eternal Truth is now come. (Gleanings 60)

The concept of Muhammad’s sealing a cycle in religious history finds rich resonances in Shi’í and Shaykhí interpretations of this verse. The “*Nahj al-Balághah*,” a compilation of the Imám ‘Alí’s utterances, depicts the Prophet Muhammad as the terminator [*khátim*] of that which preceded him, and the opener [*fátih*] of that which was closed by him (Imám ‘Alí, *Nahj* 109). There is also a Tablet of Visitation of Imám ‘Alí addressing Muhammad, which says, “Peace be upon Thee, O Muhammad, the Seal [*khátam*] of the Prophets, the Lord of the Divine Envoys, the Trustee of God in mediating divine revelation, the One that closeth [*khátim*] that which preceded Him, the One that openeth [*fátih*] that which will unfold in the future” (quoted in Al-Qummi, *Mafátih* 363). Corbin summarizes the classical Shi’í understanding of *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) by an interpretation that leaves open the possibility of the future theophanies of Imáms or *walí*. Corbin explains that the cycle of the Imamate was opened with the function to “initiate” and expound “the hidden meanings of revelation”:

After the cycle of prophecy (*dá’irat al-nubúwa*) that ended with Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets,” there comes the cycle of Initiation (*dá’irat al-waláya*), the present cycle, placed under the spiritual rule of the Twelfth Imám, the hidden Imám.... (Spiritual 58)

The powers of this twelfth Imám, the Qá’im, are further discussed in Sachedina’s excellent study of Islamic Messianism. According to hadíth literature, an individual will arise “whose name will be also Muhammad, whose *kunya*, patronymic, will also be like the Apostle of God, and who will fill the earth with equity and justice, as it has been filled with injustice, oppression and tyranny” (Sachedina, *Islamic* 3),²⁶ who will be “the most excellent [*afdál*] of all the Imams” (Sachedina, *Islamic* 71), and will command the authority of God (Sachedina, *Islamic* 162). Al-Sádiq, the sixth Imám, describes the manner by which the twelfth Imám will receive allegiance:

²⁵ Qur’án 2:8, 2:62, 2:126, 2:177, 2:228, 2:232, 3:114, 65:2.

²⁶ Sayyid Haydar al-Ámulí (d. 1385) explains this tradition by saying that, “By ‘filling the earth with justice’ is meant that al-Qá’im...will fill the hearts with knowledge [and affirmation] of the unity of God (*tawhíd*), after they had been filled with polytheism and ignorance” (quoted in Sachedina, *Islamic* 181).

There will be a light emanating from his hand, and he will say: “This is the hand of God; it is from His direction and through His command,” and will read this verse of the Qur’án: “Surely those who swear allegiance to you do but swear allegiance to God...” (48:10). (Sachedina, *Islamic* 162)

Significantly, the Qá’im will reveal a new book: “Al-Qá’im will rise with a new authority, a new Book, and a new order” (Sachedina, *Islamic* 175). However, this prediction has led to criticism of such Shí’ite sources because they challenge the Muslim belief of the *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) by attributing to the twelfth Imám the power to abrogate the Islamic religion. The defense of Shí’íh traditionalists is that the Qá’im will implement these changes on his God-given authority. In a sense, Al-Tabarsi argues, “They do not abrogate Islam.... On the contrary, they are the original, unadulterated rulings of Islam” (quoted in Sachedina, *Islamic* 176).

From the perspective of Twelver Shí’ism, Muhammad can thus be seen as sealing both prophethood and messengership in the sense of being the last of the prophets and messengers before the advent of the Day of Judgment (*qiyámat*), the rising of the Qá’im, and the dawn of a new religious cycle in the spiritual history of humanity. Consequently, Bahá’u’lláh has praised Muhammad as the one who consummated [*intahat*] messengership [*risálat*] and prophethood [*nubuwwat*](*Ishráqat* 293). In addition, he states:

I beseech Thee... by Him Whom Thou hast ordained to be the Seal of Thy Prophets and of Thy Messengers (Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers* 29)

Therefore in one sense, the quranic title of *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) implies that the titles “prophet” and “messenger” were a promissory function of theophany, which came to an end with Muhammad. “With the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, in the Bahá’í view, humankind has entered a new religious cycle characterized by a fuller theophany. In this cycle, concepts like ‘prophet’ and ‘messenger’ have been transcended” (Cole, *Concept* 18). In support, it is significant that the authors cannot find one instance in Bahá’u’lláh ‘S writings in which he refers to himself as a *nabí* (prophet) or *rasúl* (messenger).²⁷

Bahá’u’lláh’s Interpretations of Seal

In addition to the eschatological exposition above, Bahá’u’lláh’s approach to *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* uses theological clarifications. Bahá’u’lláh explains that the Manifestations have two stations— one human (the station of distinction), the other divine (the station of essential unity). Their oneness is found in their divine station where they all possess the same names and titles—a unity of attributes:

viewed from the standpoint of their oneness and sublime detachment, the attributes of Godhead, Divinity, Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence, have been and are applicable to those Essences of being (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 177)

The attribute of sealship in this theological perspective is no exception—it can apply to all the Manifestations of God:

And were they [the Manifestations of God] all to proclaim: “I am the Seal of the Prophets,” they verily utter but the truth, beyond the faintest shadow of doubt. For they are all but one person, one soul, one spirit, one being, one revelation. They are all the manifestation of the “Beginning” and the “End,” the “First” and the “Last” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 179)

This is an example of the archetypal nature of the Manifestation’s attributes. They all sealed the prophecies of the past, because they all fulfilled the promises of the religious scriptures that preceded each one of them. For example, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* demonstrates how Muhammad fulfilled the prophecies of the return of Christ in the New Testament.²⁸ These prophecies, therefore, have been sealed with the coming of Muhammad in the same way that Jesus Christ sealed the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible concerning the Messiah, and Bahá’u’lláh sealed the prophecies of the Qur’án about the Last Day.

²⁷ By implying his function as an eschatological appearance of the Most Great Announcement (Qur’án 38:67, 78:2), Bahá’u’lláh warns: “Take heed lest the word ‘Prophet’ [*nabí*] withhold you from this Most Great Announcement [*naba*]...” *Aqdas*, para. 167).

²⁸ See Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 24–93.

At a deeper level, each Manifestation's appearance seals and fulfils the eschatological expectations of that Manifestation's own religious Scripture. This is the "realized eschatology" to which Christian theologians refer:

According to this view the apocalyptic type of future expectation was a distortion, and only the more spiritual 'realized' eschatology represents the true position of Jesus. There is certainly evidence in John's Gospel that Jesus regarded the present time as definitive. People had seen the glory (1:14). The concept of judgement is not so much of some future event as of a present reality. Those who do not believe are condemned already (3:18). The judgement of this world is 'now' (12:31). (Guthrie, *New Testament* 799–800)

Bahá'u'lláh's own exegesis of Qur'án 50:20, "And the trumpet shall be blown...", is an endorsement of "realized eschatology." This verse, which is understood by Muslim commentators to refer to an event in the future that coincides with the Judgment Day, is interpreted by Bahá'u'lláh to have *already* occurred:

How grievous their blindness! They refuse to recognize the trumpet-blast which so explicitly in this text was sounded through the revelation of Muhammad....

Nay, by "trumpet" is meant the trumpet-call of Muhammad's Revelation.... (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 116)

Is there evidence in the Qur'án, the hadíth, and Islamic theology to support Bahá'u'lláh's teaching of the unity of the Manifestations? In the Qur'án, the unity of the Manifestations is emphatically stated in four verses, two of which refer to the prophets and two to the unity of the apostles:

... we make no division between any of them [*nabíyyún*].... (2:130)

... we make no division between any of them [*nabíyyún*].... (3:78)

... we make no division between any one of His Messengers [*rusul*]. (2:285)

... make no division between any of them [*rusul*].... (4:152)

Further, these verses praise people who do not make any distinction between the prophets and apostles, and describe all of them as followers of the straight path. This concept of the unity of the prophets can also be discerned in parts of the hadíth literature. For instance, there are traditions which hold that Muhammad explicitly refused to be preferred even to a minor prophet such as Jonah, and said, "Do not prefer me to Yunus b. Mattá, because he saw in the belly of the fish what I saw on the upper part of the divine throne" (quoted in Al-Bursawí, *Tafsir* 211). Other traditions describe how the prophet refused to be addressed as "the best of creation" [*khayr ai-baríyya*], maintaining that this epithet is more applicable to Abraham, who refused to be preferred to Moses²⁹ and enjoined his followers not to make any distinction between the prophets (Freidmann, *Prophecy* 52).

Discussion

Historically, the idea of the unity of the prophets did not last long. Islamic tradition soon began to portray Muhammad as the best of the prophets, superior to the others. Already quoted are the hadíth emphasizing the idea of the last prophet. In the famous *hadíth al-shafá'a*, the prophet Muhammad is the only prophet able to intercede on behalf of humanity on Judgment Day (Friedmann, *Prophecy* 54). Another tradition also considers *khatm al-nubuwwa* as a component of the prophet's superiority:

I was preferred to the [other] prophets by six things: I was given the ability to speak concisely, I was aided by fear [with which Allah struck down my enemies], [taking of] spoils was made lawful for me, the earth was made for me into a mosque and a purifying [substance], I was sent to all people, and the prophets were sealed [*khutima*] with me. (Al-Tirmidhí, *Sahíh* 41–42; English translation in Friedmann, *Prophecy* 54)

In addition, the hadíth enumerate the all-embracing names and titles of the prophet: "I am all the Prophets [*nabíyyún*]"³⁰ (*Tafsir Sáfi* 370). Rumi states that, "The name Ahmad [Muhammad] is the name of all the prophets"

²⁹ "Say not that I am better than Moses" (quoted in Lings, *Muhammad* 212). See also Qur'án 7:144.

³⁰ This tradition of Muhammad is related by Imám Sádiq who explains that it was a commentary on Qur'án 4:69.

(*Mathnaví* 25). This concept of Muhammad's superiority was integral to the development of the concept of the "Muhammadan Logos" (Affifi, *Mystical* 66) in Islam, notably among Shi'is and Sufis. In support, there are a number of traditions in which Muhammad claims pre-existence. In one, for instance, he is reported to have said, "While Adam was still between water and clay, I was a Prophet" (quoted in Jeffrey, *Ibn al Arabi* 47, fn. 4). Henri Corbin summarizes this perspective:

The starting point of the cycle of prophecy on earth was the existence of Adam. From *Nabí* to *Nabí* (the Traditions enumerate 124,000 of them), from Apostle to Apostle (which amount to 313), from great prophet to great prophet (there were six, perhaps seven), the cycle continues as far as the advent of Jesus, the last great subordinate prophet. With the coming of Muhammad, this circle is completed and closed. As *Khátim* (the Seal that consummates all the previous prophets), Muhammad is the theophany of the eternal reality of prophets, the supreme Spirit, the perfect Man....

This is why he can say, "I am the first of the prophets in creation (the supreme Spirit pre-existed the Universe), the last of them to reveal and be manifest." Each of these prophets . . . was a particular *mazhar* [manifestation], a partial reality of this eternal prophetic Reality. (*Histoire* 98–99, our translation)

It is apparent that this Logos concept was the culmination of a theology that portrayed Muhammad as the best of the prophets. In this perspective, Muhammad is described as "the Reality of Realities [*Haqíqatu' l-Haqá' iq*], the First Intellect [*al-'Aqtu'l Awwal*], the Most Mighty [Great] Spirit [*al-Rúhu'l A'zam*], the Most Exalted Pen [*at-Qatamu' t A 'td*], the Origin of the Universe [*Asu'l 'Atam*]" (Affifi, *Mystical* 66).³¹

There was therefore a shift in the Muslim attitude towards their prophet, and the factors underlying this change are relevant to our discussion. From being of equal rank to the prophets of past ages, Muhammad is later portrayed as *khátim al-nubuwwat* (the sealer of prophethood) and superior to all of God's prophets. Friedmann argues that this change reflects the development of a Muslim consciousness that occurred after the death of Muhammad by which the Islamic community gradually acquired the self-confidence and conviction that was to become a leading feature of the Islamic worldview (*Prophecy* 52). Related to this shift was the emergence of the many false prophetic claimants in the Muslim community in the first centuries. "The belief in *khatm at-nubuwwat* was an essential element in the Muslim endeavour to undermine the legitimacy of any prophetic claimants" (Friedmann, *Prophecy* 68).

Although historical factors influenced the propagation of the emphasis on Muhammad as *khátim al-nubuwwat* (the sealer of prophethood) and superior to all of God's prophets, the Bahá'í view is clarified in the concept of the Manifestation outlined in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. Underlying the approach of the *Íqán* is an understanding that each verse of revealed Scripture contains multiple, complementary meanings: "We speak one word, and by it we intend one and seventy meanings" (quoted in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 255).

In the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the above statements emphasizing the superiority of Muhammad as reflecting his station of distinction. In this station, "Muhammad is the Seal of the Prophets" indicates his uniqueness with respect to previous prophets: "Some of the apostles [*rusul*] we have endowed more highly than others" (2:253; Rodwell, *Koran* 366):

Hath not Muhammad, Himself, declared: "I am all the Prophets?" Hath He not said as We have already mentioned: "I am Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus?" Why should Muhammad, that immortal Beauty, Who hath said: "I am the first Adam" be incapable of saying also: "I am the last Adam"? For even as He regarded Himself to be the "First of the Prophets"—that is Adam—in like manner, the "Seal of the Prophets" is also applicable unto that Divine Beauty. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 162)

The "Seal of the Prophets" expresses Muhammad's particular role as the terminator of a cycle in religious history and the opener of a more universal cycle associated with eschatological fulfillment in the Day of God.

The *Kitáb-i-Íqán* explains that "each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a

³¹ In another collection of hadith by Abdaljavad, the last page of his commentary on the Qur'an lists Muhammad's "most renowned names," which include: The Primal Mirror; the Most Great Spirit [*Rúhal-A'zam*], the Perfect Man, The Manifestation of the Oneness of God [*mazhar ahadíyyat*]; the Mirror of the Divine Essence [*zhat*], the Mirror of the Divine Attributes [*sifat*], the Most Great Name [*ism-a'zam*], the Last One before the Day of Resurrection [*'áiqib Háshir*]. It is interesting that a number of these titles are the same as those of Bahá'u'lláh.

different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation” (176).³² Bahá’u’lláh explains that although some Manifestations reveal the divine attributes more brightly than others, their differences are contingent upon the varying receptivity of their human audiences. Each Manifestation reveals as much as the particular age and people can bear (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 79), and in this context the distinction accorded Muhammad in the Qur’án and the *hadíth* can be more spiritually understood. Shoghi Effendí explains that it is “not by reason of any inherent incapacity of any one of them to reveal in a fuller measure the glory of the Message with which He has been entrusted, but rather because, of the immaturity and unpreparedness of the age He lived in to apprehend and absorb the full potentialities latent in that Faith” (*The World Order* 58).

Overview and Analytic Summary

In the course of this article, we have indicated the Bahá’í acceptance of the attribute *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) as entirely applicable to the founder of its parent religion. In successive and logical analyses of this theme, we have shown:

- That the terms *nabí* (prophet) and *rasúl* (messenger/apostle) have distinctly different semantic applications in the Qur’án, applications which sometimes overlap and have a bearing on the correlative language of the religions of the world. These semantic differences leave open the possibility, in a number of verses, for the appearance of future messengers. It is also the case that the word *seal* was understood in various ways in early Islam;
- That at a deeper, non-literal level of analysis of religious language, Bahá’u’lláh accepts the attribute of *seal* and indeed all other sublime attributes as inhering in all the Manifestations of God and that the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* links this acceptance to the eschatological presence and advent of each religious founder;
- That the particular millennial connotation of *khátam al-nabíyyín* (seal of the prophets) from quranic, *hadíth*, and Shí’í sources for the Bahá’í understanding of the completion of the cycle of prophecy and the inception of the cycle of fulfillment exists.

Islam as the Final Religion

We will now discuss the Bahá’í understanding of the verses interpreted to signify that Islam is the perfect and final religion: “The true religion [*dín*] with God is Islam” (3:17) and, “whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him” (3:79). According to the Bahá’í interpretation, the word *Islam* in these verses refers to submission to the Will of God. There are many instances in the Qur’án that support this interpretation. For example, in 28:53, we read that God expects the believers to declare, on receiving the Qur’án, “We were Muslims *before* it came” (Rodwell, *Koran* 251, emphasis added). Noah is called a Muslim in 10:73 (Rodwell, *Koran* 280; Moses and his followers are called Muslims (10:84/90 and 7:123; Rodwell, *Koran* 282, 304); and in 3:60, “...Abraham in truth was not a Jew, neither a Christian; but he was a Muslim...” Abraham says to Jacob and his children “...truly God hath chosen a religion for you; so die not unless ye be also Muslims” (2:126; Rodwell, *Koran* 351). Elsewhere Joseph prays to God to have him “die a Muslim” (12:102; Rodwell, *Koran* 239), and the disciples of Christ responded to God’s revelation by saying, “We believe; and bear thou witness that we are Muslims” (5:111; Rodwell, *Koran* 499). Significantly, Muhammad is described in the Qur’án as “the first of the Muslims,”³³ whereas historically he was born after all the above prophets and apostles who are also called Muslims. The fact that Noah, Moses, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and the disciples of Christ are all called Muslims suggests that what the Qur’án means by Islam is the universal religion of God, “the changeless Faith [*dín*] of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 136), as distinct from the historical religion and set of ordinances (*sharí’ah*) practised by Muslims. At one point, the Qur’án states that Islam is the same religion as that revealed to Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: “To you hath He prescribed the faith [*dín*] which He commanded unto Noah, and which we revealed to thee, and which we commanded unto Abraham and Moses and Jesus (42:11; Rodwell, *Koran* 271). Thus, the verbal noun *Islam* is translated as “surrender, submission,” and the active participle *Muslim* as “submissive, one who surrenders (to God)” by some scholars (Kassis, *Concordance* 1079). Bahá’ís are therefore Muslims in the quranic sense because they believe that their religion is *Islam*—submission to the Will of God—

³² See also *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 21, which states that each Manifestation has “a separate designation, a specific attribute, a particular character.”

³³ Rodwell, *Koran* 333. This does not, however, deny the belief that the reality of the Manifestations is the Muhammadan reality, and in this sense Muhammad was the first to respond to the primordial Covenant (7:172).

renewed.³⁴ In keeping with this perspective, Bahá'u'lláh states that with the appearance of the Promised One, the true believers have readily submitted/surrendered [*muslimúna*] themselves unto the Divine Will (*Hikma* 159), and Bahá'is are called to “the complete surrender of one’s will to the Will of God” (*Gleanings* 338).

An interesting correlation between this Bahá'í interpretation and modern Islamic scholarship exists in the works of Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. Smith argues that the word *Islam* is used in three different ways. First there is the personal Islam for an individual Muslim, “the active personal faith”:

...his own personal submission to God, the act of dedication wherein he as a specific and live person in his concrete situation is deliberately and numinously related to a transcendent divine reality which he recognizes, and to a cosmic imperative which he accepts. (Smith, *Historical* 43)

Second, there is Islam as the Platonic ideal, the religion as it ideally is, at its best; and third, is the phenomenological reality of the total system of Islam as an institutionalized entity—a “tangible reality, a mundane phenomenon, historical and sociological” (Smith, *Historical* 43). In these latter two cases, Islam is the name of a religion. However, in the first case—Islam, the personal faith—Islam is the name of an action rather an institution: “the response of a particular person to a challenge” (Smith, *Historical* 43). Smith’s conclusion about the quranic usage of the word points toward the first meaning of the word:

...where it is used, it in some cases inevitably carries our first sense of the word, as an act of personal faith.... In other cases it may do so. I myself do not necessarily find a systematic, institutionalized sense even in the classic verses where it is customary nowadays to see the religion as being named. (*Historical* 47)

In relation to the other meanings of Islam, Smith writes that, “I am impelled to the conclusion that the concept of Islam as a religious system, and especially as a historical system, is increasingly dominant and relatively modern.... [T]he Islamic religion...has been in some ways from the beginning the most reified of all the world’s religions” (*Historical* 45–46).

Furthermore, Nasr argues that this center of Islam, “the primordial religion,” is the point of unity between Islam and the world’s religions:

The best way to defend Islam in its integral nature today is to defend *religio perennis*, the primordial religion (*al-dín al-hanif*) which lies at the heart of Islam and also at the centre of all the religions which have been sent to man by the grace of Heaven. (Nasr, *Islamic* 36)

Other verses supporting the interpretation that Islam is the last religion can also be understood in a different way by comparative textual analysis. For instance, the meaning of the quotation, “This day have I perfected [*atmamtu*] my religion for you” (5:4; Rodwell, *Koran* 486), can be clarified by the following two verses which state that the religions of Moses, Abraham, and Jacob were also perfect:

Then We gave Moses the Book, complete [*tamám*] for him who does good. (6:155) So will thy Lord choose thee [Joseph], and teach thee the interpretation of tales, and perfect [*yutimmu*] His blessing upon thee and upon the House of Jacob, as He perfected it formerly on thy fathers Abraham and Isaac. (12:6)

It would therefore appear that each revelation is perfect for its age—an attribute shared by all the revelations. This uniqueness, however, should not necessarily be a cause for exclusivism:

The ‘uniqueness’ of Muhammad is not to be understood as an exclusivism with regard to and a denial of earlier prophets and apostles, but as following the pattern which makes every *rasúl* unique and absolute with regard to his own community. (Bijlefeld, *Prophet* 23–24)

³⁴ Bahá'is are also Muslims in the narrower sense because they believe in Muhammad and the Qur’án. As Moayyad asks, “Now if Abraham, Joseph, and the apostles of Christ can be called Muslims, should not the Bahá'is, who indeed believe in Islam, also be?” (*Historical* 82).

It is the aim of this article to provide explanations for a central theological difference between Islam as interpreted now and the Bahá'í teachings. We hope this approach will contribute to the endeavor of Bahá'ís to explain their religion to Muslims and to correlate their beliefs with Islamic theology. The paradigm of approaching this interpretive problem may also serve as a model with which to resolve similar theological differences between the Bahá'í Faith and other religions.

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