

# Native Messengers of God in Canada?: A test case for Bahá'í universalism<sup>1</sup>

CHRISTOPHER BUCK

## Abstract

*Academic and popular interest has lent prestige to native spirituality and has brought it into prominence. The United Nations proclamation of 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous People gave native peoples international recognition. A corresponding interest in native culture has “valorised” (brought respect to) native spirituality. The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada took a position of advocacy on behalf of First Nations Canadians in its formal submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples in the fall of 1993. The strong native presence in Canadian Bahá'í community life raises the question of the place of native spirituality within a Bahá'í worldview. Homefront “pioneers” have extended Bahá'í universalism to a recognition of the richness and authenticity of native cultural values. Such recognition has been supported by local Bahá'í policy, as attested in teaching pamphlets addressed to native peoples, in which the concept of First World messengers of God has been validated. Although theoretically acknowledged, explicit recognition of native messengers of God has yet to be formalised in Bahá'í doctrine.*

*This study discusses the possibilities of incorporating the principle of “Messengers of God to Indigenous Peoples” within formal Bahá'í doctrine, reflecting a development that has already taken place in popular Bahá'í belief in the North American context. A hitherto under-studied Persian text of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá establishes the principle in such a way that its explicit enunciation is now possible. The problem of historical attestation remains. The prophetic credentials of Iroquois culture hero and statesman Deganawida are critically examined as a test case. The legend of Deganawida has a kernel of historicity overlaid by hagiography, with admitted Christian influence. Nonetheless, if the Bahá'í principle of “Progressive Revelation” can assimilate the Amerindian spiritual legacy as distinct from and developmentally asynchronous with Irano-Semitic and Sino-Indic religious histories, then it might be possible to accord*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was first read (*in absentia* by Dr Wendi Momen) at the 1993 Religious Studies Special Interest Group of the ABS-ESE in Newcastle, and again at the 18th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies (Cambridge, MA), where the paper received the 1994 “Award for Excellence in Bahá'í Studies” (university category). I would like to thank Christine Zerbini of the Association for Bahá'í Studies for having solicited this paper (it would otherwise not have been written), to Drs Peter Morgan and Robert Stockman for their editorial work on the paper, and to Dr Seena Fazel for the final editing. Any and all errors are entirely those of the author. The views expressed in this paper are the product of individual investigation, not authorised interpretation.

*Deganawida a provisional status with Bahá'í prophetology, and still affirm Bahá'u'lláh's unific role in world history, as oral cultures take their place alongside the more familiar "literate" traditions.*

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## **I. The limits of universalism**

Thereupon Tekanawita [Deganawida] stood up in the center of the gathering place, and then he said: "First I will answer what it means to say 'Now it is arriving, the Good Message.' This, indeed, is what it means: When it stops, the slaughter of your own people who live here on earth, then everywhere peace will come about, by day and also by night, and it will come about that as one travels around, everyone will be related..."

Now again [?], secondly I say, "Now it is arriving, the Power,' and this means that the different nations, all of the nations, will become just a single one, and the Great Law will come into being, so that all now will be related to each other, and there will come to be just a single family, and in the future, in days to come, this family will continue on.

Now in turn, the other, my third saying 'Now it is arriving, the Peace', this means that everyone will become related, men and also women, and also the young people and the children, and when all are relatives, every nation, then there will be peace... Then there will be truthfulness, and they will uphold hope and charity, so that it is peace that will unite all of the people, indeed, it will be as though they have but one mind, and they are a single person with only one body and one head and one life, which means that there will be unity... When they are functioning, the Good Message and also the Power and the Peace, these will be the principal things everybody will live by; these will be the great values

among the people.” (Deganawida, Iroquois prophet, circa 1450 CE)<sup>2</sup>

To the warring tribes 700–800 years ago there came an astonishing Prophet of Peace—Deganawidah united five, later six, mutually hostile tribal groups in a federal union based on democracy, the first in the Western Hemisphere. He cemented this union with a “Great Law of Peace,” a constitution which propounded one expansive human family... And thus, in God’s Plan, with Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as perceptive mediators, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution were vital steps (after the War of Independence [1775–83]) toward realising in America the Iroquois concept of the primacy of individual rights as superior to property and power.

And of course the Iroquois foreshadowed, in their Longhouse of sky and earth, the planetary message of the Bahá’í Faith for today. (Dr David Ruhe, former member of the Universal House of Justice)<sup>3</sup>

### **Introduction**

The United Nations declared 1993 as the International Year of Indigenous People. This reflects a renewed interest, popular and academic, in native spirituality. In Canada, such concern with “First Nations”<sup>4</sup> has had an ecumenical impact as well. A strong native presence in the membership of the Canadian Bahá’í community is reflected in the fact that native Canadians represent the most significant influx of new converts to the Bahá’í Faith in Canada, with the greatest teaching successes reported in the Peigan Reserve in southern Alberta. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the Bahá’í National Convention held in Regina 20–24 May 1993, the Bahá’í program for children focussed “on the unique culture, heritage and destiny of Canada’s Native peoples.”<sup>5</sup> The “destiny” referred to here is the Bahá’í-inspired vision of Amerindian awakening and its anticipated impact on the historic path to world peace.

A corresponding concern with native empowerment and amelioration has

- 2 John Arthur Gibson, *Concerning the League: The Iroquois League as Dictated in Onondaga*, newly elicited, edited and translated by Hanni Woodbury in Collaboration with Reg Henry and Harry Webster on the Basis of A.A. Goldenweiser’s Manuscript. *Memoir 9* (Winnipeg: Algonquian and Iroquoian Linguistics, 1992): 36–41.
- 3 David S. Ruhe, “A New Evolution: Religious Bonding for World Unity,” *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 6.4 (1994–1995): 45–57 [45].
- 4 On Canadian native peoples, see R. Snyder-Penner, “A Select Bibliography on Indigenous Peoples in Canada,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 9 (Spring 1991): 171–178. On native spirituality generally, see Armin W. Geertz, “Native North American Religions,” in *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. J. R. Hinnells (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997): 514–546; J. Epes Brown, “North American Indian Religions,” in *A Handbook of Living Religions*, ed. J. R. Hinnells (Middlesex, UK.: Penguin, 1985): 392–411; Brown, *The Spiritual Legacy of the American Indian* (1982); S. Gill, “Native American Religions,” in *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience: Studies in Traditions and Movement*, vol. 1, ed. C. Lippy & P. Williams (N.Y.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1988): 137–152; S. Gill, *Native American Traditions: Sources and Interpretations* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1981); J. Paper, “The Sacred Pipe: The Historical Context of Contemporary Pan-Indian Religion,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56 (Winter 1988): 643–665; W.H. Capps, *Seeing with a Native Eye: Essays on Native American Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).
- 5 *Canadian Bahá’í News* 5.9 (Feb 1993): 13.

produced results at the level of Bahá'í councillor leadership. On 10 September 1993, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, whose chairperson was a native Canadian woman, made a formal submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.<sup>6</sup> This position of advocacy on behalf of native peoples is a natural development of Bahá'í universalism and its social gospel. It is also borne of a genuine respect and appreciation for the authenticity and intrinsic value of native spirituality:

Aboriginal cultures have been distinguished by a worldview best characterised as spiritual in nature. It is significant that Aboriginal leaders and members of Aboriginal communities at the grass roots refer so frequently to the Creator and to the human spirit when they approach the discussion of social problems ... The religious [Christian] element present in the wave of settlement that first intruded on, and then largely displaced the cultures and societies which were living on this continent, denied the universality of the spirit and the genuine, divine source for the spiritual inspiration which formed the basis of Aboriginal society...

Unity is the only foundation on which problems can be solved. ... We, therefore, ask that the Commission make recommendations relative to new governing structures that increase both the flexibility and the unity of Canadian federalism, a model which the whole world can look at, accommodating the aspirations of Aboriginal peoples and their sense of world citizenship.<sup>7</sup>

In its advocacy on native issues,<sup>8</sup> prior representations had been made by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada in 1960<sup>9</sup> and in 1968,<sup>10</sup> the outcome of a history of productive relations with native Canadians. Canadian Bahá'í interactions with native peoples is characterised not only by respect and advocacy, but by ecumenism as well. Integration of sacred ceremonies (sweet

6 The Universal House of Justice has formally approved this initiative. "It does indeed seem appropriate," the House of Justice states, "that the Canadian Bahá'í community should contribute to the national discussion on so important a subject, and you [the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly] are to be warmly commended for the care and expertise that have gone into the preparation of the views and recommendations you propose to share with the Royal Commission" (*Bahá'í Canada* 6.3 [Sept/Oct1993]: 23).

7 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, "The Canadian Bahá'í Community Submission to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples—September 10, 1993," in *Anarchy into Order: A Compilation for Study* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1994): 27–56 [31–32; 38].

8 *The Right to An Identity* (Toronto: Canadian Bahá'í Committee, n.d.). The time frame within which publication of this pamphlet must have occurred (1967–1976) is ventured by W. Collins, *Bibliography of English Language Works on the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths 1844–1985* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1990).

9 National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, "Submission to the Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Indian Affairs," in *Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, No. 4, May 18, 1960* (Canada Senate and House of Commons, 24th Parliament, 3rd Session; Joint Committee of the Senate and the House of Commons on Indian Affairs, 1960). Also in French. Cited in Abler, *A Canadian Indian Bibliography 1960–1970* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1974) 148–49 (entry 720).

10 Abstracted in Abler, *A Canadian Indian Bibliography* 51–52 (entry 262).

grass and peace pipe ceremonies, blanket dances, and powwows) in Bahá'í conferences, especially in Western Canada, has enriched Canadian Bahá'í experience in a pluralistic rather than a syncretistic way. In Bahá'í teaching endeavours, identification of the essence of the Bahá'í revelation with the heart of native spirituality borders on "transconfessionalism," in which two or more religious traditions are not only respected, but integrated into an inclusive belief system. Local and national Bahá'í policy supports such cultural accommodation.

Reflected thus in its representations to the Parliament of Canada and in its teaching pamphlets, the relation of the Bahá'í Faith to native Canadians has been a dual one: one of advocacy and one of teaching. The implications of this dual relationship are quite obvious. The Bahá'ís would like to see native Canadians embrace their religion and, at the same time, preserve native cultural identities. The purpose of the present study is to examine the implications of such *rapprochement* for Bahá'í doctrine.

#### ***A. The "official" and "popular" paradox***

A classic paradox in the academic study of religion arises from the formal comparison of "official" and "folk" (or "popular") forms of religion. Ideally, the two should mirror one another. In reality, they often do not. This paper will explore one such paradox: indigenisation of sectors of Canadian Bahá'í community life, supported at the policy level but not fully integrated at the doctrinal level.

Rise in the indigenisation of Canadian Bahá'í conferences reflects a current trend among missions today in integrating elements of native spirituality with dominant forms of the Canadian religious culture. From a Bahá'í perspective, the major warrant for a religion's spiritual authenticity is the attestation of a *bona fide* "Manifestation of God" in any given tradition. Acknowledgment of Messengers of God among native Canadians would appear to be a specifically Bahá'í innovation, despite the parallel indigenisation of Christian worship. Towards this end, the concept of Messengers of God to native Canadians has been introduced in the form of localised teaching pamphlets, officially approved by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada but never officially adopted as a public teaching for the non-native population. By accepting native traditions as richly spiritual and valid, and through an "indigenisation" of Bahá'u'lláh, prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith, at the missionary level, Bahá'ís have in effect created a body of opinion that may lie outside of the formal teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, since no Manifestation of God among native peoples has been explicitly recognised in Bahá'í doctrine. Official Bahá'í doctrine, which is at heart universalist and egalitarian, has yet to establish a formal position with respect to indigenous religions. This raises the question of the place of native spirituality in Bahá'í prophethood.

### ***B. Cross-cultural messianism and Bahá'í universalism***

*She [White Buffalo Calf Woman] has returned. Not in the same form that she came in the first time but really in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. (Counsellor Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Delahunt, 1995)<sup>11</sup>*

Appeal to prophecy is a classic Bahá'í teaching technique. In their missionary zeal, Bahá'í “pioneers” have appealed to native prophecies to establish Bahá'u'lláh. This process creates an eschatological bridge between native worldview and Bahá'í universalism, in a linkage between native wisdom teacher and Bahá'í prophet, between vision and fulfilment. As prophecies tend to be teleological, it is natural that Bahá'í recourse to prophecy is primarily one of missionary ingenuity. Neither believer nor teacher, as a rule, ever question prophecy. To do so is religiously imprudent, as the force of the proof text resides in its authority.<sup>12</sup>

Not unlike popular Mormon identification of Jesus Christ with the ancient Toltec culture hero Quetzalcoátl, the figure of Bahá'u'lláh is becoming progressively indigenised in the Americas. Taking the figure of Quetzalcoátl as a prime example of this Bahá'í teaching technique,<sup>13</sup> Bahá'ís have appealed to prophecies surrounding the return of the Toltec civiliser, and to the “mantic history” of the “Books” of the Yucatec Mayan “Chilam Balam” priests as well.<sup>14</sup> The mystique of such a tradition possibly resides in the fact that it is literate<sup>15</sup> (the

11 Counsellor Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Delahunt, “Bahá'í,” in *A Parliament of Souls: In Search of Global Spirituality. Interviews with 28 Spiritual Leaders from Around the World*, ed. M. Tobias, J. Morrison, B. Gray (San Francisco: KQED Books, 1995) 22.

12 The historian of religion, however, may view apocalyptic literature from quite a different perspective entirely. Generally speaking, it can be observed phenomenologically, on comparative grounds, that prophecy is as much a society's wish-image as it is vaticination, *ex eventu* or otherwise.

13 From an academic perspective, the Quetzalcoátl prophecies are best treated by David Carrasco, *Quetzalcoátl and the Irony of Empire: Myths and Prophecies in the Aztec Tradition* (University of Chicago Press, 1982) 148–204; idem, “Quetzalcoátl's Revenge: Primordium and Application in Aztec Religion,” *History of Religions* 19 (May 1980): 296–320. For a translation of one of the native Quetzalcoátl traditions, see J. Bierhorst, *Four Masterworks of American Indian Literature: Quetzalcoátl/The Ritual of Condolence/ Cuceb/The Night Chant* (Toronto: Doubleday, 1974) 17–105.

14 Latin literature purportedly transcribed from hieroglyphic texts. One of the “Sacred Books of the Jaguar Priests” has been translated by M. S. Edmonson, *The Ancient Future of the Itza: The Book of Chilam Balam of Tizimin* (Austin, Texas, 1982); cf. R. Roys (tr.), *The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1967). Several Naturegraph publications, including pamphlets by the late Vinson Brown who established Naturegraph, have appealed to such traditions.

15 M. Jansen, “The Art of Writing in Ancient Mexico: An Ethno-iconological Perspective,” in *Visible Religion* (Leiden: Brill, 1986). In the sixteenth century, as Spaniards further explored Mesoamerica, they found eighteen different systems of writing. See also O. Dickason, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto: McClelland and  
(continued...)

Mayans had an extraordinary interest in prophecy) and “historical” (calendrical, chronological, cyclical).

In 1975, in the ancient capital of the vast yet centralised Peruvian Inca empire—the golden city of Cuzco—Bahá’ís attending an All-Quechua Bahá’í Conference (Quechua is the surviving language of the ancient Inca empire, now the second official language of Peru) were photographed beside a sign, which, translated from the Spanish, reads: “Bahá’u’lláh is the return of Viracocha.”<sup>16</sup> Eschatologically, Bahá’u’lláh has become the Inca culture hero Viracocha *redivivus*.<sup>17</sup> The existence of prophecies envisioning the return of Quetzalcoátl and Viracocha predisposed Bahá’í pioneers and converts to identify Bahá’u’lláh with both of these culture heroes, Toltec and Inca.<sup>18</sup> The phenomenon of Quechua converts identifying Viracocha with Bahá’u’lláh might in part be explained by a current belief among present-day Incas that the head of the Inca deity Ri actually exists and is reconstituting itself in the Andean underworld, its head growing a body toward its feet. When the body of Ri is restored, the Inca will return.<sup>19</sup>

The growing number of localised indigenous messianic connections with the eschatological persona of Bahá’u’lláh will inevitably be exhausted, but the process is still in a developmental stage that has yet to witness the official recognition of native spirituality as a universal feature of Bahá’í doctrine.

### C. Native teaching and Bahá’í folk beliefs

- 15 (...continued)  
Stewart, 1992) 432, n. 34.
- 16 Photograph in *The Bahá’í World: An International Record*, vol. 16 (Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978) 445. The sign in Spanish reads: “Bahá’u’lláh el retorno Viracocha.” The caption states: “This sign says that Bahá’u’lláh is the return of Viracocha, a divine being of Indian tradition.”
- 17 Phenomenologically, the figure of Bahá’u’lláh has been associated with various messianic traditions:
- |                             |      |   |
|-----------------------------|------|---|
| (1): <b>Bábí tradition:</b> | *    | Him Whom God Shall Manifest; the Báb remanifest.      |
| (2): <b>Shí’í Islam:</b>    | *    | Imám Husayn <i>redivivus</i> .                        |
| (3): <b>Zoroastrianism:</b> | *    | Sháh Bahrám Varjávand.                                |
| (4): <b>Judaism:</b>        | *    | Ancient of Days; Glory of God; Everlasting Father.    |
| (5): <b>Christianity:</b>   | *    | Christ returned; the Comforter/Spirit of Truth.       |
| (6): <b>Sunni Islam:</b>    | ***  | Return of Jesus Christ?                               |
| (7): <b>Hinduism:</b>       | **   | Kalki Visnuayasas; the Tenth Avatar; return of Kṛṣṇa. |
| (8): <b>Buddhism:</b>       | **   | Maitreya, the Fifth Buddha.                           |
| (9): <b>Indigenous:</b>     | **** | Viracocha’s return (Quechua Inca tradition).          |
- Legend** *Period during which messianic identification was made:*
- |      |  |
|------|--|
| *    | During Bahá’u’lláh’s ministry.                                 |
| **   | During ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ministry.                                |
| ***  | During the Guardian’s ministry. Earlier attestation uncertain. |
| **** | Possibly as early as the Guardian’s ministry.                  |
- 18 See also Tony Shearer, *Lord of the Dawn: Quetzalcoátl, the Plumed Serpent of Mexico* (Healdsburg, CA: Naturegraph, 1971): *passim*, for one Bahá’í’s identification of Bahá’u’lláh as the return of Quetzalcoátl.
- 19 Dickason, *Canada’s First Nations* 440–441, n. 11.

With respect to the international profile of the Bahá'í Faith, the vibrant native presence in the Canadian Bahá'í community is a matter of some renown. A full-colour picture of native Bahá'ís performing at a major Bahá'í conference in Montreal is featured prominently on page eight in the Bahá'í International Community publication, *The Bahá'ís: A Profile of the Bahá'í Faith and Its Worldwide Community*.<sup>20</sup>

On page ten, *The Bahá'ís* reads: “Bahá'ís the world over come from all religious backgrounds: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Zoroastrian, *animist*, and non-religious” (emphasis added). The use of the term “animist” here is politically incorrect.<sup>21</sup> For the same reason, the present writer recognises that other terms, such as “primitive” and “primal”—these being classifications for native spirituality current in scholarly literature—are themselves theological constructs, and therefore will not be used in this paper.<sup>22</sup> (The term “primordial” is perhaps more neutral, although this does not reflect some very recent developments in native spirituality, which have come about through the influence of both anthropologists and journalists.)

Further on, page 37 of the same publication reads: “People from all of the major religious backgrounds have found that the promises and expectations of their own beliefs are fulfilled in the Bahá'í Faith. *Bahá'ís from Native American, African and other indigenous backgrounds, similarly, find in the Bahá'í teachings fulfilment of prophetic visions*” (emphasis added). Here, reference to prophetic visions would logically require the instrumentality of prophets (major or minor) or, if not, then seers or sages. Prophecies and visions are acknowledged far more easily than are prophets and seers, even though the former require the instrumentality of the latter. Thus, on page 34, under the header “Divine Messengers,” the Bahá'í International Community states: “Bahá'ís believe that throughout history the Creator has revealed Himself to humanity through a series of Divine Messengers. These Messengers include: Abraham, Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muḥammad, The Báb, Bahá'u'lláh.”

Absent from this list are native prophets and seers, because they are not

20 *The Bahá'ís: A Profile of the Bahá'í Faith and Its Worldwide Community* (Oakham: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992) is a publication of the Bahá'í International Community (a non-governmental organization [NGO] with consultative status at the United Nations), Office of Public Information.

21 Use of the term “animism” is now politically incorrect, given changing public attitudes towards native spirituality, not to mention the marked disinclination by natives themselves to use this term. Many find it a rather wooden category, and an implicitly condescending one at that. Native religious traditions, it is true, are suffused with ecological referents. For the modern native Canadian, what may have once qualified as animism has been considerably psychologised. Myth is now appreciated as heritage and is found to be replete with meaning, sending its own message to an ecologically endangered industrial society.

22 For a relevant discussion of the why such terms are so theologically freighted, see James L. Cox, “The Classification ‘Primal Religions’ as a Non-Empirical Christian Theological Construct,” *Studies in World Christianity* 2.1 (1996): 55–76.



attested in Bahá'í scriptures, except in principle. The problem of attestation notwithstanding, we get a much different picture when it comes to native teaching. There are some very significant reasons for this.

Throughout Bahá'í history, Bahá'í missionaries—known as “pioneers”—have done more than anyone else to universalise the Bahá'í Faith, both demographically and doctrinally. In 1916–17, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá lent considerable impetus to this missionary diversification in his *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, which, at that time, was addressed to four countries: the United States, Canada, Newfoundland, and Greenland.<sup>23</sup> In fulfilling ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision of systematic missionary work to be prosecuted throughout the Americas, Bahá'í pioneers dedicated their lives to promoting the Bahá'í gospel of unity. Evidence of such dedication is not lacking: what appears to be a local Mohawk tribute to Bahá'í pioneers, James and Melba Loft, was published in *Tekawennake*.<sup>24</sup>

In the Bahá'í mission field, it was necessary to relate Bahá'í teachings and truth-claims to indigenous traditions. Native-oriented Bahá'í teaching pamphlets were published for that purpose. It is important to note that these pamphlets typically expressed genuine Bahá'í solidarity with elements of native spirituality, which included recognition of some of the great spiritual teachers revered in native traditions. Such pamphlets—some in typescript, others handwritten—were thus on the cutting edge of Bahá'í universalism. In the pamphlet review process, Bahá'í policy has supported the teaching initiatives of Bahá'í pioneers, but official Bahá'í doctrine has not formally assimilated some of the sweeping universalisms published by Bahá'í pioneers or by other authors of teaching materials.

In one teaching pamphlet, for instance, Peter Simple, Bahá'í Athabaskan Indian from Fort Yukon, Alaska, asserts that in ancient times God sent prophets to the native peoples, and stresses the importance ‘Abdu’l-Bahá placed, in the *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, on teaching native Americans and native Canadians (including the Inuit/Eskimo peoples):

*Long before the white man came to America, the Indians had their prophets and holy men. In this way God showed them how to live with each other and gave them laws and teachings. Some of these holy men told of the days that would be coming. They told of a time when the white men would come and when things would be hard for the Indians. All of them said the day would come when the Indians would rise up and again be a proud and noble people.*

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said of the American Indians, “...should these Indians be educated and properly guided, there can be no doubt that through the Divine teachings they will become

23 As pointed out to me by Stephen Bedingfield, personal communication, 28 Dec. 1995. It should be noted that Newfoundland joined the Canadian federation in 1949.

24 [No author cited], “30 Years of Pioneering on Tyendingaga Honored,” *Tekawennake* [Brantford, Ontario] 5.4 (23 May 1979). The present writer has not accessed this article.

so enlightened that the whole earth will be illumined.”<sup>25</sup>

There are many Indian prophecies from different parts of America that are much alike. They go something like this: They tell of a day when the Indian will be run-down, when his soul will be sick and he will not act like much of a man. They say that a time will come when there will be a great deal of confusion about all things, especially religion. Then, a new truth will come from the East (where Bahá'u'lláh lived). This will wake up mankind and will cause the Indians to wake up and become the great people they were before. This can happen when the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh touch the hearts of the Indians.<sup>26</sup>

The first sentence in excerpt above would find widespread support among grassroots Bahá'ís. The fact that there is an Assembly's authorisation behind the publication of a statement such as this indicates at least a tacit, semi-official endorsement of this view. This is corroborated by another pamphlet, which also was reviewed for accuracy. In 1961, Bahá'í pioneers serving the Navajo Reservation in the United States prepared a pamphlet which was endorsed by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada for publication in 1962. This pamphlet, in typescript, states:

God sent a Messenger to the red people.  
The Messenger told the red people about One God.  
The Messenger told the red people to love God.  
The Messenger told the red people to pray to God.  
The Messenger told the red people to do to other people  
What you want them to do to you.

The Messenger told the red people He will come again.  
The Messenger told the red people there will be a great peace someday.  
The Messenger told the red people to obey His laws.  
The red people obeyed God's Messenger's laws.  
The red people were happy then.<sup>27</sup>

Note that “the Messenger” referred to here is not named.

Clearly, but for teaching purposes only, a Bahá'í commitment to the idea of Messengers of God to native peoples has been made in the publication of localised, native-oriented, and authorised teaching material, including Bahá'í-produced films. This missionary approach has been administratively supported by Bahá'í governing councils at local and national levels.

25 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan, revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the North American Bahá'ís* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, rev. ed. 1977) 32–33. These Tablets were written in 1916–17, but not prosecuted as an organised teaching plan until 1937 (as the first Seven Year Plan). This oft-cited statement is of cardinal importance in Bahá'í native missionary endeavours.

26 Peter Simple and John Kolstoe, *Bahá'í Teachings: Light for All Regions* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 24.

27 *The Bahá'í Story, prepared by Bahá'í Pioneers serving the Navajo Indian Reservation USA and revised for use in 1962 in Canada* (Toronto: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada). My thanks to Jayne Long, Assistant Secretary for the National Teaching Committee of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, for providing me a photocopy of this pamphlet.

This practice appears to have a basis in Bahá'í principle. That there were messengers of God sent to native peoples can easily be extrapolated on the authority of certain prophetological universalisms, such as this pronouncement by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "There have been many Manifestations of God. One thousand years ago, two hundred thousand years ago, one million years ago, the bounty of God was flowing, the radiance of God was shining, the dominion of God was existing."<sup>28</sup>

In most cases, the identities of these ancient Manifestations of God have been lost in the mists of prehistory. Ethnographic records of the American Eskimo tradition, for example, present no eligible culture hero whom Bahá'ís would be tempted to speculatively hypothesise as having possibly been a Messenger of God. Nevertheless, since God alone is the source of revelation, knowledge of God and of the will of God requires the mediation of divine messengers:

Bahá'u'lláh tells us that God has never left man alone, that from the beginning of time God has sent His Messengers or Prophets to man to guide him.... This Religion of God has been given to man in many different parts of the world by different Messengers. We do not know the names of all these Messengers because some came a long time ago and some came to peoples who did not use writing, only passed the teachings on from generation to generation through word of mouth. For example, this would be true of the Eskimo people. No doubt, through the ages, God guided the Eskimo people through Messengers who gave many beautiful teachings and prophecies, telling them how to live and what the future would bring. We don't know the names of these Messengers because no one wrote them down, but we do learn something of Their teachings when we hear some of the old people talk and we recognise the truth of some of the things that were foretold. No people were left without guidance from God.<sup>29</sup>

28 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His visit to United States and Canada in 1912* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 463.

29 Dorothy Weaver, *The New Age: A Message to the Eskimo* (n.p., n.d.) 3. My thanks to Jayne Long for providing me with this pamphlet as well. I have not been able to locate the following out-of-print pamphlets and booklets: *Circle of Unity: A Proclamation to the Native Americans from the Bahá'í Faith* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980); Ted Clause, *New Light on the Spirit Path* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1966); *Sequoyah: Tribute to a Servant of Mankind from the Bahá'í Faith to the Cherokee Nation* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976); *A Message to Indians* (Toronto: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, n.d. [195-?]); *A New Day Comes* (Wilmette: American Indian Services Committee, 1954); *Okí! Nitsítapee = A Message to the Blackfeet Indians* (Toronto: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, n.d. [195-?]); English and Blackfeet text; *Toosahyuauuk Eneupanune = Message to the Eskimos* (Anchorage: Alaska Teaching Committee, 1954); English and Eskimo text; *Trail of Light* (Otavalo, Ecuador: Editoriale Gallo Capitán, n.d. [1983]); *Bahá'í Faith: There is an Old Saying: "When You See a Track or Footprint that You Do Not Know Follow It to the Point of Knowing"* (Thornhill, Ontario: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, n.d. [1984]); English and Inuit text. I have not heard the two cassette tapes by Sam Bald Eagle Augustine (Bahá'í Micmac), *Our Elders Speak: Bahá'í Talks from the Heart*, vols. 1 and 2 (Toronto: Omni-Source Music, 1991). Neither have I had access to this important title, Rúhíyyih Rabbání, *A Message to the Indian and Eskimo Bahá'ís of the Western Hemisphere* (Toronto: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, 1969), which may or may not still be in print. The reader should be informed that there (continued...)

A Canadian-produced Bahá'í pamphlet, *A-de-rih-wa-nie-ton On-kwe-on-we Neh-ha: A Message to the Iroquois Indians*,<sup>30</sup> opens with the following words:

Long ago, before the white man came, the Indians were wise and spiritually strong men. They were taught to show justice, truth, honour, live [*sic*], courtesy, trustworthiness, and patience towards their fellow men. Perhaps the greatest thing they had was the spirit of faith—faith in the great Creator, and in the world of the spirit, which they knew was very close to the world in which they lived.

At different times, to different Indian tribes and nations, there came Indian Teachers sent by God to teach them these things. When the people obeyed these great Teachers, they found much happiness in their lives. Each person knew how to act towards other people as well as towards animals, plants and the earth itself.<sup>31</sup>

Despite generic concessions to the existence of native messengers of God in principle, in practice there is an explicit Bahá'í stricture against adding names of spiritual teachers who are not attested to in the Abrahamic tradition, most notably in the Qur'án. While the Qur'án would appear to have very little to do with indigenous traditions in the New World, and has no binding authority on Bahá'í doctrine or praxis generally, the Qur'án is seen as a universal scripture, thereby acting as a prophetological constraint on any such authority claims. This has not altogether deterred Bahá'ís from expressing personal interest in the authenticity of culture heroes as possible Messengers of God. There are, for example, chapters on the Iroquois prophet Deganawida in two Bahá'í-authored books: *Warriors of the Rainbow* and in *Voices of Earth and Sky*.<sup>32</sup>

#### ***D. The problem of “adding names”***

Universalism has its limits.<sup>33</sup> Bahá'í salvation history accounts for the appearance of the great world religions as each having been founded by a “Manifestation of God.” A Bahá'í list of the founders of the major religions was given in the previous section. This list may be marked by incompleteness. In response to a

29 (...continued)

are a number of audiovisual materials with native themes produced by Bahá'ís, nearly all of them drawing upon native prophecies. It is likely that these kinds of materials also express the idea, implicitly or explicitly, that the Great Spirit sent Messengers of God to native peoples.

30 *A-de-rih-wa-nie-ton On-kwe-on-we Neh-ha: A Message to the Iroquois Indians* (translated by Charles A. Cooke; “Issued by—The National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada,” no date [1968]), English and Mohawk text. Photocopy provided by Jayne Long.

31 *Ibid.* 3.

32 Willie Wiloya and Vinson Brown, *Warriors of the Rainbow: Strange and Prophetic Dreams of the Indian Peoples* (Healdsburg, CA: Naturegraph, 1962) 42–48; Vinson Brown, *Voices of Earth and Sky* (Stackpole, 1979). There is also a Bahá'í-produced video on “native Prophecies.” Whether or not this video draws from the Deganawida cycle is not known to the present writer.

33 On the development of Bahá'í universalism, see my article, “A Unique Eschatological Interface: Bahá'u'lláh and Cross-cultural Messianism,” in *In Iran. Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Smith (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1986) 157–179.

believer who raised this issue, Shoghi Effendi explained: “Regarding your question: the only reason there is not more mention of the Asiatic Prophets is because their names seem to be lost in the mists of ancient history. Buddha is mentioned and Zoroaster in our scriptures—both non-Jewish or non-Semitic Prophets. We are taught that there have always been Manifestations of God, but we do not have any record of their names”.<sup>34</sup> This answer satisfies the problem of inclusivity in cases where all historical traces have vanished. But what of living oral traditions, if and when such narrative events preserve and prolong the memory of a culture hero who is likely to have been a real historical figure in pre-Columbian times? A legend might, after all, have a historical kernel, a basis in history.

While historicity is a necessary warrant of authenticity, it is not a sufficient warrant for determining prophetic credentials. Shoghi Effendi stated why: “Regarding your questions: we cannot possibly add names of people we (or anyone else) think might be Lesser Prophets to those found in the Qur’án, the Bible and our own Scriptures. For only these can we consider authentic Books.”<sup>35</sup>

Note that this pronouncement, in principle, does not exclude other religious traditions from recognition. Take the case of Buddhism, for instance. Nowhere in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings is Buddhism ever discussed. In explaining Bahá’u’lláh’s silence, Shoghi Effendi reasoned: “As there were no followers of the Báb or Bahá’u’lláh derived from the religions of the Far East in Their days, this may be the reason that They did not address any Tablets directly to these people.”<sup>36</sup> Nor is there any mention in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings of the Buddha by name, for the very same reason. Yet Bahá’u’lláh’s designated successor and interpreter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, assimilated both Kṛṣṇa<sup>37</sup> and Buddha into Bahá’u’lláh’s prophetic

34 From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 10 October 1950, *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í reference file*, comp. H. Hornby, 2nd ed. (New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1988) 503.

35 From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 13 March 1950, *Lights of Guidance* 503.

36 From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 5 March 1957, *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by the Universal House of Justice 1963–1990* (Maryborough, Victoria: Bahá’í Publications Australia, 1991) 1: 23.

37 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá accepted both Buddha and Kṛṣṇa as Manifestations of God. Evidence of Bahá’u’lláh’s estimation of Kṛṣṇa is found in a Tablet revealed for the Zoroastrian agent in Tehran, Manakji Limji Hatari, known in Iran as Mánikchi Sáhíb (addressed to him through Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl Gulpáygáni). The text of this Tablet is appears in Vol.7 of *Ishráq-Khávarí* (ed.), *Má’ida-yi ásmání* (Tehran: Mu’assisa Maṭbu’át Amrí, 129 Badi’ [1972]). Manakji asks Bahá’u’lláh about the place of Hinduism in progressive revelation, and quotes Kṛṣṇa’s prophecy about Visnu adventing himself when the cycle of history reaches its nadir of corruption. Bahá’u’lláh answers Manakji obliquely, referring him to the *Book of Certitude*. From Manakji’s perspective, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity are all revealed religions that share in the same universe of discourse. An argument from silence is possible to deduce here, since Bahá’u’lláh did not contradict Manakji in the slightest on this particular question. Bahá’u’lláh’s epistles to Jamál Effendi (the spiritual father of the Bahá’í community of India): and to the believers in Bombay could likely disclose a more explicit pronouncement on Kṛṣṇa. See J.R.

(continued...)

scheme, which is referred to as “Progressive Revelation.” While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá certainly had the authority to add to the number of Manifestations of God attested to in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, individual Bahá’ís have neither the authority nor the licence to do so. In this respect, the Bahá’í canon of named Manifestations of God is, for all intents and purposes, closed.

How is it possible, therefore, for high-ranking Bahá’í officials to add to this list anyway?<sup>38</sup> In the epigraph at the beginning of this paper, former Universal House of Justice member Dr David S. Ruhe was quoted as saying: “*To the warring tribes 700–800 years ago there came an astonishing Prophet of Peace—Deganawidah.*”<sup>39</sup> This statement was made as the opening remark of the Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture, presented at the 18th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies at Harvard on 13 August 1994, and since published in the *Journal of Bahá’í Studies*. Also cited above is a similar statement made by Counsellor Jacqueline Left Hand Bull Delahunt—herself a Lakota Indian—in 1995, when, in a widely televised interview, she declared her personal belief that: “*She [White Buffalo Calf Woman] has returned. Not in the same form that she came in the first time but really in the teachings of*

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37 (...continued)

Cole, “Bahá’u’lláh on Hinduism and Zoroastrianism,” forthcoming in *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin* (Cole, personal communication, 26 October 1993). In India, according to Cole, Persian treatises on Hinduism were composed under the patronage of pre-Mughal and Mughal courts. Some of this literature circulated in Iran prior to and during the nineteenth century. Among those who took an interest in the topic was the seventeenth-century Persian poet and thinker known as Mír Findiriskí (Abu’l-Qásim Astarábádí [d. 1640]): to whom Bahá’u’lláh refers in the *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust) 41. This individual had edited the Persian translation (by Niḥám al-Din Panipati) of the *Yoga-Vasistha*, the *Kitáb-i Júk* (or *Júk*), an English translation of which has been published by the State University of New York Press. Evidently, Bahá’u’lláh had read this book. In the early collection of tablets known as *Iqtidárát* (Bombay: Nāṣirí Press, 1310 A.H. [1892–3]), Bahá’u’lláh refers to this work as evidence for the existence of humankind prior to Adam. Part of this tablet is translated in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* section LXXXVII (see p. 174). Cole observes that Bahá’u’lláh “appears to have preferred its cosmology to a literal reading of the Bible and the Qur’án.” In addition to Hindu cosmology and other religious matters, the Book of Júk relates the story of Kṛṣṇa among the avatars of Visnu.

38 In an obituary for the Iroquois Bahá’í pioneer James Loft, Deganawida is spoken of as a prophet in a purely referential way: “It is perhaps significant that Tyendinaga is the birthplace of Deganawida, the fifteenth century figure whom tradition regards as the founder of the Iroquois Confederacy. Regarded as a prophet by the Indian people, Deganawida, who was Huron by birth and Mohawk by adoption, united various tribes under one law and devoted his life to establishing peace, righteousness and civil law... His grave marker – within the shadow of the monument erected to the revered Deganawida – bears the simple legend, *Alfred “Jim” Loft – Bahá’í Pioneer* and is engraved with the Indian thunderbird symbol and a nine-pointed star” (Evelyn Loft Watts and Charles Jardine, “Alfred James Loft 13 July 1908–22 May 1973,” in *The Bahá’í World* 16: 515–516).

39 Ruhe, “A New Evolution,” 45.

*Bahá'u'lláh.*<sup>40</sup> Although this statement reflects her personal conviction, yet it was made in her official capacity as an appointed dignitary of the Bahá'í Faith. Since more is known about Deganawida than about White Buffalo Calf Woman, it should prove useful at this juncture to examine the Deganawida legacy, to try to see why it presents itself to not a few Bahá'is as evidence of an authentic native messenger of God—a conviction that illustrates the paradox of official and popular Bahá'í beliefs.

## II. “The Peacemaker” as a test case

### A. A personal note

In 1993, in my first contact with Native Canadians at an interfaith event held in Mississauga, Ontario, the name of Deganawida was spoken of, with reverence, in the same breath and spirit as the name of Jesus Christ. This spirit of profound reverence made a deep impression on me, and I resolved to find out more about this native Canadian culture hero. In course of my subsequent reading I came across this generous assessment of the legacy of Deganawida and the Iroquois, spoken by Richard Pilant in his address to the Institute of Iroquoian Studies in 1960:

The Six Nations in Canada constitute the most complete survival we have today of one of the highest cultures of one of the races of mankind – the Indian. Unlike the Mayas and the Incas to the South, the Long House People developed a democratic system of self-government. They alone among the Indian nations made a major political contribution in their form of Government which can be maintained to have furnished a prototype for the United States and the United Nations. Socially the Six Nations met the sociologist's test of higher cultures by having given a preferred status to women.<sup>41</sup>

This assessment, though somewhat out of place in an academic setting, shows the kind of recognition Deganawida can enjoy even in learned societies. This may be due in part to the importance of the Iroquois Great League of Peace (as a cultural and ritual institution) and the subsequent Iroquois Confederacy<sup>42</sup> (as a political and diplomatic entity), and its presumed influence on the framing of the American system of government.<sup>43</sup> (The problem of Iroquois influence will be discussed later in this paper.) The task of disentangling fact from fancy in the

40 Delahunt, “Bahá'í,” in *A Parliament of Souls* 22.

41 Richard Pilant, “An Address to Iroquoian Studies,” McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, 6 April 1960; *apud* G. Reaman, *The Trail of the Iroquois Indians: How the Iroquois Nation saved Canada for the British Empire* (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates, 1967). cf. K. Herzog et al., “Women, Religion, and Peace in an American Indian Ritual,” *Explorations in Ethnic Studies: The Journal of the National Association for Ethnic Studies* 7.1 (Jan. 1984): 16–38.

42 See J. Tuck, “Iroquois Confederacy,” *Scientific American* 224.2 (1971): 32–42.

43 A distinction drawn by D. Richter, “Ordeals of the Longhouse: The Five Nations in Early American History,” in *Beyond the Covenant Chain: The Iroquois and Their Neighbors in North America, 1600–1800* (Syracuse University Press, 1987) 11–27 [11].

Deganawida cycle, though, is even more problematic, but systematic attempts have been made. It should be pointed out that the Deganawida cycle is sacred to the Iroquois nations, and that “the Peacemaker” himself is revered to this day as a Messenger from the Creator.

### ***B. The Deganawida cycle***

Deganawida is a name said to mean, “*Two water currents flowing together.*”<sup>44</sup> If tradition warrants, sometime between AD 1400<sup>45</sup> and AD 1600 (possibly in the year AD 1451 when the Iroquois witnessed an eclipse of the sun), Deganawida,<sup>46</sup> the “Heavenly Messenger,”<sup>47</sup> is said to have established the Great League of Peace among the warring Five Nations of the Iroquois (from east to west, the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, and Seneca). The League’s origins and purposes are explained in the central Iroquois myth, the Deganawida epic.<sup>48</sup> The nature of this warfare was that of a cultural pattern known as the “mourning war,” essentially a system of blood feuds.

Huron by birth and Mohawk by adoption, Deganawida was a prophet, statesman and law giver who co-founded with Hiawatha the Iroquois “League of People of the Longhouse,” also known as the “Great League of Peace.” This League, in actual practice, was vested in a council of fifty peace chiefs, or “sachems” (a term used to distinguish these from other chiefs). Each successor to a League chief was chosen by a “clan mother” presiding over the lineage in which the title was held. The governing council required unanimous consent to render each of its decisions.<sup>49</sup> The symbol of the League was the White Tree of Peace, over which hovered an ever-vigilant eagle.

The historicity of the League of Five Nations is not in dispute, nor is the existence and role of Deganawida himself in the formation of the original Iroquois confederacy. The traditional legend, which survives in several versions, has variations, that pose no serious challenge to the unity of the narrative. Mythic elements, of course, give the legend its charm and symbolic depth, which in and

44 A. Parker, “The Traditional Narrative of the Origin of the Confederation of the Five Nations Commonly Known as the Iroquois,” in *Parker on the Iroquois*, ed. W. Fenton (Syracuse University Press, 1968) 3: 64, n. 2.

45 The year A.D. 1390 is given in J. Myers, *The Fitzhenry and Whiteside Book of Canadian Facts and Dates* (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1991) 17. No documentation is adduced to support such a date. It has now entered the popular domain as a “fact.”

46 A drawing of Deganawida appears in Dickason, *Canada’s First Nations* 72.

47 Whether “Heavenly Messenger” is the actual meaning of, or is simply an epithet for, Deganawida is not specified in Dickason, *Canada’s First Nations* 71.

48 Two critical treatments of the Deganawida cycle deserve mention here: D. Richter, “Ordeals of the Longhouse,” 11–27; C. Vecsey, “The Story and Structure of the Iroquois Confederacy,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54.1 (1986): 79–106; reprinted in *Imagine Ourselves Richly: Mythic Narratives of North American Indians* (New York: Crossroad, 1988) 94–117.

49 Tooker, “The United States Constitution and the Iroquois League,” 113–114.



of themselves are no less valuable. Christian influence, however, cannot be ruled out, and, for this reason, the version known as the Code of Dekanahwideh together with the Tradition of the Origin of the Five Nations' League, "Prepared by the committee of chiefs appointed by the Six Nations' Council of Grand River, Canada, and adopted by Council of Chiefs, July 3, 1900," is prefaced with this concession:

With reference to the origin or birth, character and doings of Dekanawideh [*sic*] as herein chronicled, it will be observed that they present an analogy or similarity to Hebrew biblical story and teachings. This is portrayed strongly in the narration of the birth of Dekanawideh and also in extraordinary powers which he is attributed to have possessed. There is little doubt that some of this influence was brought about as a result of the labours and teachings of the Jesuit fathers among them.<sup>50</sup>

The "extraordinary powers" which Deganawida is said to have possessed need not be of Christian provenance, however, as this is a common feature of aboriginal narratives and of folklore generally. In the epitome of the Deganawida legend given below, no attempt is made to note variants.<sup>51</sup>

In ancient times, Tarenyawagon ("The Holder of the Heavens") saved the Five Nations from onslaught of the Stone Giants. He conquered monsters and put the world in order. He gave laws for men to follow, taught the art of war, and provided for good fishing. Over time, the five tribes had a disagreement, and went their separate ways.

Among the ancestors a child was born to a Huron virgin near the Bay of Quinte near Kingston, Ontario. This child was an incarnation of Tarenyawagon, entrusted with a great mission of peace. His first task was to cure the Iroquois of cannibalism.

Deganawida set out on his mission in a canoe carved from white stone. He crossed Lake Ontario. On the far shore he found hunters whose village had been razed. They told of warmongering, slaughter of innocents, and of cannibalism. Deganawida then visited Djigonsasa, the Mother of Nations, who fed warriors travelling through. He told her to cease supporting the war parties, and then imparted to the Mother of Nations his gospel of Righteousness, Peace, and Power, symbolised by the Longhouse and the Great Law:

I carry the Mind of the Master of Life, and my message will bring an end to the wars between east and west. The word that I bring is that all peoples shall love one another and live together in peace. This message has three parts: Righteousness and Health and Power – *Gaiihwiyo*, *Skenno*, *Gashedenza*. And each part has two branches.

50 *The Code of Dekanahwideh together with The Tradition of the Origin of the Five Nations' League*, "Prepared by the committee of chiefs appointed by the Six Nations' Council of Grand River, Canada, and adopted by Council of Chiefs, July 3, 1900," in W. Fenton (ed.), *Parker on the Iroquois* (Syracuse University Press, 1968) 3: 62.

51 For this the reader is referred to the work of Vecsey, *Imagine Ourselves Richly* 98–106, 115–117.

Righteousness means justice practised between men and between nations; it means also a desire to see justice prevail.

Health means soundness of mind and body; it also means peace, for that is what comes when minds are sane and bodies cared for.

Power means authority, the authority of law and custom, backed by such force as is necessary to make justice prevail; it also means religion, for justice enforced is the will of the Holder of the Heavens and has His sanction.

It will take the form of the Longhouse, in which there are many fires, one for each family, yet all live as one household under one Chief Mother. Hereabouts are Five Nations, each with its own Council Fire, yet they shall live together as one household in peace. They shall be the Kanonsiónni, the Longhouse. They shall have one mind and live under one law. Thinking shall replace killing, and there shall be one Commonwealth.<sup>52</sup>

She was the first to embrace Deganawida's message and, in so doing, gave clan mothers priority over men.

Deganawida came to one cannibal's lodge. Deganawida climbed to the roof and lay chest-down by the smokehole. After the cannibal's grisly stew was brewed, as the cannibal was about to eat from a bowl made of bark, he suddenly beheld in it the face of Deganawida. The cannibal thought he saw himself looking up from the depths of the pot. Then Deganawida met the cannibal as he threw away the body. They ate venison together, then buried the corpse. To the cannibal Deganawida explained his message, adding that the Ruler had ordained that antlers be worn as a sign of authority. The cannibal accepted. Thereupon Deganawida named the cannibal, Hiawatha.

Deganawida went next to the Mohawks to preach his message. To the "Flint Nation" Deganawida proclaimed: "The Great Creator from whom we are all descended sent me to establish the Great Peace among you. No longer shall you kill one another and nations shall cease warring upon each other. Such things are entirely evil and he, your Maker, forbids it."<sup>53</sup>

Though persuaded by his message, the Mohawks demanded proof of Deganawida's power to establish such a peace. The prophet obliged, answering: "I am able to demonstrate my power for I am the messenger of the Creator and he truly has given me my choice in the manner of my death."<sup>54</sup> Trial by ordeal was in order, one of his own choosing. He scaled a tree, and, after it was felled over a precipice, emerged unscathed. He then wed the chief's favourite daughter and became a chief himself. The chief accepted Deganawida's message.

Hiawatha tried to convert the cannibal despot, Atotarho, his half-brother. Atotarho was a wizard, chief of the Onondagas, with snakes for hair, twisted in body and mind. The wizard frustrated all of Hiawatha's attempts to establish peace. Then, according to one version, Osinoh the Witch transformed herself into

52 P. Wallace, *The White Roots of Peace* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1946) 13–14. On the six principles that Deganawida explains to the Mother of Nations, see Vecsey, *Imagine Ourselves Richly* 113–115.

53 Fenton, *Parker on the Iroquois* 3: 15.

54 Fenton, *Parker on the Iroquois* 3: 16.

an owl and killed each one of Hiawatha's daughters. Hiawatha was distraught, with no one who could comfort him in his grief. Mourning, Hiawatha forsook the Onondagas.

As he wandered, Hiawatha came upon a lake or cluster of lakes, filled with ducks. He startled them, and as they took flight, they took all the lake water with them. Gathering the shells from the lake bottom and stringing them into beads, Hiawatha invented wampum and spoke of its use for consoling those who mourn.<sup>55</sup>

In a cornfield outside a Mohawk village, Hiawatha found a hut, where he made a fire and proceeded to make wampum. To messengers from the village Hiawatha taught protocol in the ritualised use of wampum. The village chief promised Hiawatha a seat of honour at council where they could consult over food, but the promises were broken. Hiawatha again went wandering.

Hiawatha then chanced upon Deganawida, who went about consoling Hiawatha with eight of the thirteen strings of wampum fashioned by Hiawatha. Wampum proved an effective medicine for those who mourn, as Hiawatha's grief was dispelled.

Deganawida then sent scouts in the form of crows, bear, or deer, to find Atotarho's column of smoke. In the meantime, Deganawida and Hiawatha successively won the allegiance of the Oneidas, Cayugas, and Senecas. With the two having the power of unity, Deganawida led the Nations to Atotarho, in order to transform him, singing the Peace Hymn along the way. As the procession reached Onandaga, Deganawida exorcised Atotarho of his evil spirits. The two Iroquois prophets got Atotarho to agree to be the firekeeper, the principal chief, with veto power and Onandoga as the capital of the Five Nation's territory. After enlisting the Onondaga chief's support, Deganawida planted the Great Tree of Peace in what is now Syracuse, New York. Tradition relates that Deganawida uttered these words as he established the confederacy:

I am Dekanawidah and with the Five Nations' Confederate Lords I plant the Tree of the Great Peace....

I name the tree the Tree of the Great Long Leaves. Under the shade of this Tree of the Great Peace we spread the soft white feathery down of the globe thistle as seats for you, Adodarhoh, and your cousin Lords....

Roots have spread out from the Tree of the Great Peace, one to the north, one to the east, one to the south and one to the west. The name of these roots is The Great White Roots and their nature is Peace and Strength....

We place at the top of the Tree of the Long Leaves an Eagle who is able to see afar. If he sees in the distance any evil approaching or any danger threatening he will at once warn the people of the Confederacy.<sup>56</sup>

#### The Iroquois prophet cast weapons of war beneath the Four White Roots of

55 See L. Ceci, "The Value of Wampum among the New York Iroquois: A Case Study in Artifact Analysis," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 38.1 (1982): 97-107.

56 Fenton, *Parker on the Iroquois* 3: 3.

the Tree and so founded the Five Nations Confederacy, which comprised some fifty League chiefs, investing each with a crown of antlers, the wing of a seagull to brush dust away from the council fire pit, and a pole to rid the area of all creeping creatures. Symbolising the League was the Longhouse with its five fire pits under one roof, wampum belts depicting the Five Nations, Onondaga being a great tree or heart at its centre. A meal of beaver tail, with no sharp utensils in the common dish; five arrows bundled together to make them strong, the council fire and pillar of smoke that reached the sky; five stalks of corn emerging from one stalk fed by four roots: all of these symbolised the power of the League.

The League then established its foreign policy, with laws regulating admission into the League. Delegations were sent out to the Ojibways, Cherokees, and other tribes to offer them the Great Peace. The League reserved the right to wage just war against any opposing nation that refused to accept the "Great Peace."

The final symbol of the League was the Condolence ceremony, a re-enactment of the rite as performed by Deganawida for Hiawatha, and by both for the exorcism of Atotarho. The Condolence ceremony, with its thirteen wampum strings of Requickening, would serve to swerve the mourner from vengeful grief resulting in never-ending blood feuds.

Having fulfilled his mission, Deganawida departed, promising to come again in a time of crisis. Deganawida's very name was considered sacred, and for this reason, he is often simply referred to as "the Peacemaker."<sup>57</sup>

Typical of myths narrating the exploits of other culture heroes, Deganawida "travels magically, overcomes a whole series of trials, and battles monsters.... The myth of origin, like the legend, tells that the hero's task is to structure the world and society. It is in this sense that myths are the reflection of society."<sup>58</sup>

The historicity of Deganawida, though never in doubt, presents all the problems of the so-called quest for the historical Jesus. Overlooked by Vecsey in his critical treatment of the Deganawida cycle—but in complete accord with his findings—is S. Seldon's dissertation on Deganawida. After examining differing published versions, along with versions collected by the author himself (documented in English during visits to several Iroquois reserves and reservations including Tyendinaga, Six Nations, and St. Regis), Seldon found that the legend of Deganawida was transformed over time into myth. Furthermore, the roles of Deganawida and Hiawatha altered through time as a function of various social

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57 This epitome of the Deganawida cycle was for the most part based on Vecsey's much longer and carefully documented summary in, "The Story and Structure of the Iroquois Confederacy," 82–90. Vecsey is to be consulted for the important variants in the retelling of the saga in its several versions and for his penetrating analysis of the legend as a whole.

58 Bonnefoy, *Mythologies* 2: 1161.

and psychological pressures on the Iroquois.<sup>59</sup> Of the extant versions of the Deganawida cycle, Gibson's narrative is, according to Vecsey, "perhaps definitive."<sup>60</sup>

### **C. Mad Bear's prophecy of Deganawida's return**

Since there is at least one tradition of Deganawida's return, it is probably only a matter of time before Bahá'í pioneers to Iroquois peoples proclaim Bahá'u'lláh to be the *return* of Deganawida. Are not the prophecies surrounding the return of Deganawida, beyond the amelioration of the Iroquois themselves, simply an extension of his vision of the Great Peace? If so, is there affinity with Bahá'í teachings and does acceptance of such teachings really conduce to Iroquois aspirations and needs? These questions of faith are not value neutral and so fall outside of the scope of this study. Phenomenologically, the process of Bahá'í teaching typically makes use of such traditions, as in the case of Quechua Bahá'ís proclaiming Bahá'u'lláh to be the return of Viracocha. Let us then examine one tradition foretelling the return of Deganawida.

Mad Bear (Wallace Anderson), was an Iroquois nationalist, a Tuscarora by birth. In August, 1959, author Edmund Wilson had an interview with Mad Bear. In the course of that exchange, Mad Bear expressed his occasional despondency over the plight of his people and the seeming futility of his struggle for their rights. In such moments, Mad Bear related: "Sometimes I feel that the struggle is completely hopeless. Then again I don't know. I think that maybe some day the Iroquois will come into their own again."<sup>61</sup> Then Mad Bear proceeded to relate a prophecy ascribed to Deganawida, which was presumably a source of encouragement whenever his collective hopes for his people flagged. He had heard this prophecy from the head clan mother of the Senecas, who resided on the Tuscarora reserve, and "from a number of other sources," which Mad Bear did not disclose.<sup>62</sup> Mad Bear's version of the prophecy of Deganawida's return begins with a lament typical of apocalyptic literature in general:

When Deganawida was leaving the Indians in the Bay of Quinté in Ontario, he told the Indian people that they would face a time of great suffering. They would distrust their leaders and the principles of peace of the League, and a great white serpent was to come upon the Iroquois, and that for a time it would intermingle with the Indian people and would be accepted by the Indians, who would treat the serpent as a friend.

This serpent would in time become so powerful that it would attempt to destroy the

59 Sherman Ward Seldon, *The Legend, Myth and Code of Deganawida and their Significance to Iroquois Culture History* (Ph.D. Thesis, Folklore Program, Indiana University). Available from University Microfilms. Abstracted in Ablor, *A Canadian Indian Bibliography* 656–57 (entry 2959).

60 Vecsey, "Story and Structure," 80, n. 3.

61 Mad Bear, *apud* Wilson, *Apologies to the Iroquois* 163.

62 *Apologies to the Iroquois* 163–164.

Indian, and the serpent is described as choking the life's blood out of the Indian people.<sup>63</sup>

Mad Bear goes on to describe how the appearance of a red serpent distracts the white serpent. As the two serpents feud, the Indian retreats to the "land of the hilly country" and revives the spirit and principles of peace that Deganawida had established. A seer in the form of a young boy appears and, while watching the contest between the red and white serpents, would impart a message of hope to the Iroquois people, with the promise: "And Deganawida said that they will gather in the land of the hilly country, beneath the branches of an elm tree, and they should burn tobacco and call upon Deganawida by name when we are facing our darkest hours, and he will return." The prophecy ends as follows:

The next direction that he [a young leader, an Indian boy, possibly in his teens, who would be a choice seer] will face will be eastward and at that time he will be momentarily blinded by a light that is many times brighter than the sun. The light will be coming from the east to the west over the water.... Deganawida said as this light approaches that he would be that light, and he would return to his Indian people, and when he returns, the Indian people would be a greater nation than they ever were before.<sup>64</sup>

Vecsey confirms that the prophecy of Deganawida's return is sufficiently attested in Iroquoian tradition to be considered an essential, though not prominent, feature in the Deganawida cycle.<sup>65</sup> The Six Nations' version has the prophet condition his return on times of crisis: "If at any time through the negligence and carelessness of the lords, they fail to carry out the principles of the Good Tidings of Peace and Power and the rules and regulations of the confederacy and the people are reduced to poverty and great suffering, I will return."<sup>66</sup> In 1990, a recent trade book, *Native American Prophecies*, has popularised Deganawida's prophecy as transmitted by Mad Bear.<sup>67</sup>

So ends the Deganawida cycle, but not its enduring legacy. We now take up the Iroquois influence hypothesis, as this informs popular appreciation of Deganawida.

### C. *The Iroquois influence hypothesis*

Former Universal House of Justice member Dr. David S. Ruhe was quoted in the epigraph above as saying:

Deganawidah united five, later six, mutually hostile tribal groups in a federal union based on democracy, the first in the Western Hemisphere. He cemented this union with a "Great Law of Peace," a constitution which propounded one expansive human family... And thus,

63 *Apologies to the Iroquois* 163–164.

64 *Apologies to the Iroquois* 166–167.

65 Vecsey, "Story and Structure of the Iroquois Confederacy," 90.

66 **Fenton, *Parker on the Iroquois* 3: 105.**

67 Peterson, "Deganawidah: Peacemaker of the Iroquois," in *Native American Prophecies* 62–89. Mad Bear's prophecy is reprinted on 77–79.

in God's Plan, with Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson as perceptive mediators, the Bill of Rights and the Constitution were vital steps (after the War of Independence [1775–83]) toward realising in America the Iroquois concept of the primacy of individual rights as superior to property and power. And of course the Iroquois foreshadowed, in their Longhouse of sky and earth, the planetary message of the Bahá'í Faith for today.<sup>68</sup>

Is this appreciation of Deganawida's influence on American history borne out by the facts? Does it withstand critical analysis?

Until recently, Hollywood has tended to focus on American Indian war societies. But, according to native peoples, an ancient peacemaking tradition has existed among the First Nations since the dawn of North American aboriginal history. One recent study argues that one of the most compelling bodies of evidence for the existence of a peace movement among indigenous societies during the American Revolution is preserved in the Morgan Papers, a collection of largely unpublished documents relating to the first American Indian peace treaty in 1776.<sup>69</sup> Historical arguments have also been advanced which hypothesise Iroquois influence on Benjamin Franklin, one of the founding fathers of American democracy.<sup>70</sup>

Documentary evidence for this latter position has not been lacking. In 1751, Archibald Kennedy, collector of customs and receiver general for the province of New York, wrote a pamphlet entitled, *The Importance of Gaining and Preserving the Friendship of the Indians to the British Interest, Considered*, in which he proposed a union of the colonies, reasoning:

Whenever the Collonies [*sic*] think fit to joint [*sic*: such a union], *Indian* Affairs will wear quite another aspect. The very Name of such a Confederacy will greatly encourage our *Indians*, and strike terror into the *French*; and be a Means to prevent their unsupportable Incroachments, which they daily make with Impunity and Insult [.]. And this is what they have long dreaded.<sup>71</sup>

Comparison with the Iroquois Confederacy would appear to be implicit. In 1751, Benjamin Franklin, in a letter to James Parker, his New York City printing partner, made the comparison explicit:

It would be a very strange Thing, if six Nations of ignorant Savages should be capable of forming a Scheme for such a Union, and be able to execute it in such a Manner, as that it has subsisted Ages, and appears indissoluble; and yet a like Union should be impracticable

68 Ruhe, "A New Evolution," 45.

69 G. Schaaf, "The American Indian Peace Movement: Past and Present," *Interculture* 18.4 [No. 89 Eng. ed.] (Oct–Dec 1985): 2–13; reprinted from *Akwesane Notes* 17.5 (Fall 1985). Schaaf highlights recent achievements by Amerindian leaders to promote peace.

70 B. Johansen, *Forgotten Founders: Benjamin Franklin, the Iroquois and the Rationale for the American Revolution* (Ipswich, MA: Gambit, 1982).

71 A. Kennedy, *The Importance of Gaining and Preserving the Friendship of the Indians to the British Interest, Considered* (New York: James Parker, 1751; London: E. Cave, 1752) 18. Cited by Tooker, "The United States Constitution and the Iroquois League," 110.

for ten or a Dozen Colonies, to whom it is more necessary, and must be more advantageous; and who cannot be supposed to want an equal Understanding of their Interest.<sup>72</sup>

Prior to this, Benjamin Franklin had published the text of a speech by Canasatego, Onondaga chief and spokesman for the Iroquois, delivered at a treaty conference held in Lancaster in 1744. Three decades later, in 1775, the Commissioners of the Twelve United Colonies expressed their debt of gratitude for Canasatego's counsels:

Brothers, our forefathers rejoiced to hear Cannassateego speak these words. They sunk deep into their hearts. The advice was good; it was kind. They said to one another: "The Six Nations are a wise people. Let us hearken to them, and take their counsel, and teach our children to follow it. Our old men have done so. They have frequently taken a single arrow, and said, Children, see how easy it is broken. Then they have taken and tied twelve arrows together with a strong string or cord, and our strongest men could not break them. See, said they, this is what the Six Nations mean. Divided, a single man may destroy you; united, you are a match for the whole world."

We thank the Great God that we are all united; that we have a strong confederacy, composed of twelve provinces, New Hampshire, etc. These provinces have lighted a great council-fire at Philadelphia, and have sent sixty-five counsellors to speak and act in the name of the whole, and consult for the common good of the people, and of you, our brethren of the Six Nations, and your allies.<sup>73</sup>

In 1988, the American Congress had been asked to pay formal tribute to the Iroquois Confederacy for its putative influence on the formation of the American confederacy. The proposed Senate Concurrent Resolution 76, in part, stated:

Whereas, the original framers of the Constitution, including most notably, George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, are known to have greatly admired the concepts, principles, and governmental practices of the Six Nations of the Iroquois Confederacy; and

Whereas the Confederation of the original thirteen colonies into one Republic was explicitly modelled upon the Iroquois Confederacy as were many of the democratic principles which were incorporated into the Constitution itself....

*Resolved by the Senate (the House of Representatives concurring), That:*

(1) The Congress, on the occasion of the 200th Anniversary of the signing of the United States Constitution, acknowledges the historical debt which this Republic of the United States of America owes to the Iroquois Confederacy and other Indian Nations for their demonstration of enlightened, democratic principles of government and their example of a free association of independent Indian nations (United States Congress 1987).

The proceedings of the conference on "The Iroquois Great Law of Peace and the United States Constitution" held at Cornell University in September 1987 have been published

72 L. Labaree (ed.), *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961) 4: 118–19. Cited by Tooker, "The United States Constitution and the Iroquois League," 110.

73 Commissioners of the Twelve United Colonies, "Journal of the Treaty Held at Albany, in August, 1775," *Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, 3rd series, 5 (1836): 83–84. Cited in Tooker, 112.



under the title *Indian Roots of American Democracy*.<sup>74</sup>

Iroquoist Elisabeth Tooker has taken to task such a view of history, calling it a “myth.”<sup>75</sup> Despite the negative verdict of recent scholarship, the power and prestige of the Iroquois Confederacy was sufficient to impress Benjamin Franklin as a model for comparison. Lack of evidence to substantiate direct influence need not diminish recognition of the Iroquois model, which owes its existence, at least traditionally, to Deganawida.

Scholarship can be relied upon to provide correctives. But, as in the case of Tooker’s critique, debunking myth is not always the same as demythologising myth. Debunking totally discredits the myth, whereas demythologising salvages from the myth its historical kernel and, if that is lacking, whatever truth might still be gleaned from the myth. Resolving this controversy exceeds the scope of this paper. No amount of scepticism, however, is likely to dissuade native views on such matters.<sup>76</sup>

Independence has always been a fact of Iroquois self-consciousness.<sup>77</sup> During the American War of Independence, the Iroquois had sided with the British against the Americans and so lost most of their original homelands in northern New York. As “His Majesty’s Allies,” the Iroquois received the Six Nations Reserve in southern Ontario, which they were to “enjoy forever” under the King’s “protection.” Though today the Six Nations Reserve remains their principal reserve, the autonomy which the Iroquois were to have enjoyed by natural right and by treaty turned out to be a deceit. The Iroquois quest for self-rule in 1923 took on an international dimension as a delegation led by Deskaheh took their case before the League of Nations. Canada at that time was in an awkward position, as it was still not free of colonial status (Canada did not become a full-fledged member of the League of Nations until 1925). The appeal met with defeat on jurisdictional grounds, further heightening the irony of independence both granted and denied by the forces of colonialism. Fuelled by a sense of betrayal of an historic alliance, the Iroquois independence movement struggled after Deskaheh’s untimely death in 1925. In 1928, hereditary chiefs declared independence, renouncing allegiance to Canada and to the British Crown. Frustration peaked in 1988 as the “Warriors”—self-arrogated protectors

74 Cited in J. Barreiro (ed.), *Indian Roots of American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: *Northeast Indian Quarterly*, 1988), *apud* Tooker, 122, n. 1.

75 Tooker 115, 121.

76 See “Iroquois Great Law of Peace and the United States Constitution: How the Founding Fathers ignored the Clan Mothers,” *American Indian Law Review* 16 (1991): 497–531; cf. P. A. Levy, “Exemplars of Taking Liberties: The Iroquois Influence Thesis and the Problem of Evidence,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.3 (July 1996): 588–604; S. B. Payne, “The Iroquois League, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.3 (July 1996): 605–620; D. A. Grinde, “Sauce for the Goose: Demand and Definitions for Proof regarding the Iroquois and Democracy,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 53.3 (July 1996): 621–636.

77 See D. Ireland, “The Rationalisation of Iroquois Religion,” *Nexus* 1.2 (Spring 1981): 29–41.

of the Longhouse but not universally accepted as such—blocked the south entrance to the Mercier bridge, situated on reserve land and connecting Island of Montreal with the south shore. The standoff, which lasted twenty-seven hours, erupted again in 1990 when a similar standoff at Oka, Québec, would last for seventy-eight days.

The Iroquois continue to assert their independence from Canada through using their own passports when travelling abroad.<sup>78</sup> Constitutional reform brought about a proposed acknowledgement by the Government of Canada of the inviolate perpetuity of native sovereignty established as an inherent right, a proposal defeated in the nationwide referendum on the Charlottetown Accord in 1991.

Religion has been both a revitalising and a divisive force in the recent history of the Iroquois. In 1799, the Seneca Chief Handsome Lake (d. 1815) began to experience a series of visions as to how the Iroquois should adapt to altered circumstances. The strict code of ethics that Handsome Lake formulated incorporated Christian belief in heaven and hell and traditional Iroquois elements such as belief in witchcraft, resulting in a nativistic religious revival with Christian overtones. Handsome Lake's movement became known as the Longhouse religion, which acted as a powerful force in restoring Iroquois cultural self-confidence. Yet Handsome Lake's vision of Iroquois unity is unfulfilled. The Iroquois, on both Canadian and American sides of the border remain divided, now further divided by religion—Christian and Longhouse.<sup>79</sup>

Various native Bahá'ís and their non-native Bahá'í friends have appealed to Indian prophecies to demonstrate what Bahá'ís perceive to be a shared vision of unity. Now that Deganawida has been introduced, and his prophetic credentials—on their own merits—presented, it remains to take up again an analysis of various approaches Bahá'ís may take in forming an opinion of Deganawida's place in the world's spiritual history.

### III. Paradigm bias and assimilation

#### A. *Semiticism as a paradigm bias*

The notion of what I shall term *Semiticism* is crucial here. As formulated and as currently understood, Bahá'í prophetology—in its essential features—differs little from standard Islamic prophetology. It is universal in respect of literate, but not oral, cultures. In other words, religions that lack either a Semitic or Indo-Aryan ethnic endowment are unlikely achieve parity with those religions that are already accepted within the Bahá'í tradition.

#### B. *The Islamic legacy: Sabianism as a Procrustean category*

Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl tried to adumbrate forms of indigenous religions (especially

<sup>78</sup> Dickason, *Canada's First Nations* 355–359.

<sup>79</sup> Dickason, *Canada's First Nations* 355.

African) under the rubric “Sabian”—although Abu’l-Faḍl’s writings appear to be devoid of reference to New World traditions. Problems of category become apparent in his definition of the Sabians, given in the course of his commentary on the so-called “sign-refusal saying” of Jesus (Matt. 12:39, 16:1–4; and parallels): “After the spread of the religion of Jesus and the establishment of his Word, the learned among the Christians changed the term ‘sign’ to ‘wonder.’ Perhaps this latter word is taken from the terminology of the ‘Sabian’ religion, which was the religion of the peoples of Europe, Africa, and Asia (excluding the Indians and Chinese) before the appearance of Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad.”<sup>80</sup>

There are certain problems with this explanation from a Bahá’í perspective, since, in the *Book of Certitude*, Bahá’u’lláh counters the stock Islamic charge of corruption (*tahrif*) by Christians of their own Gospels. Abu’l-Faḍl’s speculative etymology complicates matters further, but what is of particular interest here is his definition of the term “Sabian.” Translator Juan Cole remarks that, “Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl has therefore, used the word generally to refer to all non-Judaic and non-Indic religions of antiquity.”<sup>81</sup> This may be true insofar as the learned apologist was concerned, but his own explanation fails to include, at least in categorical terms, the religious traditions of the indigenous, pre-Columbian New World. Furthermore, Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl’s usage of the term was broader than that which Shoghi Effendi was to adopt a few decades later:

As to the religion of the Sabæans, very little is known about the origins of this religion, though we Bahá’is are certain of one thing, that the founder of it has been a divinely-sent Messenger of God. The country where Sabæanism became widespread and flourished was Chaldea, and Abraham is considered as having been a follower of that Faith.<sup>82</sup>

The term “Sabian,” as I have previously shown, reflects an essentially Islamic view of the history of religions, which entailed an obvious lack of consensus and indeed confusion in the use of the term which Bahá’í terminology stood to inherit.<sup>83</sup> The Bahá’í Faith has therefore inherited from Islam an

80 Mírzá Abu’l-Faḍl, *Miracles and Metaphors* 100.

81 *Ibid.* 100, translator’s note.

82 From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi dated 10 November 1939, *Compilation of Compilations* 1: 20.

83 See the present writer’s “The Identity of the Šābi’ūn: An Historical Quest,” *The Muslim World* 74 (July/Oct 1984): 172-186. Bahá’í Orientalist Alessandro Bausani has worked out a typology of monotheisms that offers, for some, an intellectually attractive model, in which native Canadian spirituality might be classed as an archaic monotheism. Despite his personal convictions as a Bahá’í, Bausani’s typology is phenomenological, not religious, arising out of his vocation as a scholar. Bausani’s typology is thus not a Baha’i proposal, but rather an academic one. It extends the possibilities for a phenomenological paradigm that may be considered world-inclusive. In his typology of monotheisms, Bausani is originist to the extent that he classifies the Bahá’í Faith as a derivative or “secondary” monotheism (as the daughter religion of Islam), but without prejudice to the Bahá’í Faith’s independent status and the intrinsic “originality” of its message. In such a genetic model, native spirituality need not be treated reductively in respect of Asiatic diffusionist (continued...)

unresolved problem in the use of the term “Sabian.” For Bahá'u'lláh, it meant the religion of John the Baptist.<sup>84</sup> Shoghi Effendi, who surely must have known of this identification, apparently favoured the more common Islamic usage of the term.

Given the inadequacy of the term “Sabian” from both an historical perspective and an Islamic perspective, it is fortunate that Shoghi Effendi anticipated the formidable intellectual objections that could be raised against a dogmatic usage of it.

### **C. Nine is not enough**

Bahá'ís have traditionally spoken of nine existing world religions. Nine Faiths epitomise the Bahá'í scheme of salvation history: (1) Sabianism; (2) Hinduism; (3) Zoroastrianism; (4) Buddhism; (5) Judaism; (6) Christianity; (7) Islam; (8) the Bábí religion; and (9) the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>85</sup> Shoghi Effendi was quick to recognise the intellectual objections that could be raised to such a fixed and closed canon. Therefore he counselled Bahá'ís not to lay too much stress on this list.<sup>86</sup> On the evidence of current publications, this foresighted doctrinal flexibility was

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83 (...continued)

theories. Bausani summarises his classification system on page 168 of his important article, “Can Monotheism Be Taught? (Further Considerations on the Typology of Monotheism),” *Numen* 10 (1963): 167-210. He proposes the following taxonomy: 1. Monotheisms proper, in which Judaism and Islam are classed as primary monotheisms, with Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith as respectively secondary (derivative, yet independent) monotheisms; 2. Failed monotheisms, which include Zoroastrianism as a primary monotheism, Manichaeism as a secondary monotheism, and Akhenaton's reform as an archaic monotheism; 3. Paramonotheisms, which include Sikhism and various mysticisms. Native spirituality, which in a certain sense is henothestic, might be thought of as an archaic paramonotheism.

84 Bahá'u'lláh identifies the Sabians so: “After the martyrdom of the son of Zachariah [John the Baptist], some of His followers did not turn unto the divine Manifestation of Jesus, the Son of Mary, and removed themselves from the Faith of God, and until this day they have continued to exist in the world, being known to some as the Sabians. These people consider themselves to be the community of John” (*Qamus-i Iqan* 2: 987, cited in *World Order* 10 [Fall 1975]: 3). In another passage, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of the followers of John the Baptist as those “who are even now still on the earth and are known as the Sabians” (*Asrar al-Athar* 4: 233, cited in *World Order* 10 [Winter 1975-76]: 11).

85 In a letter to “Mrs. Russell,” dated 28 July 1936, Shoghi Effendi wrote: “The number nine, which in itself is the number of perfection, is considered by the Bahá'ís as sacred, because it is symbolic of the perfection of the Bahá'í Revelation which constitutes the ninth in the line of existing religions, the latest and fullest Revelation which mankind has ever known. The eighth is the religion of the Báb and the remaining seven are: Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islám, and the religion of the Sabeans. These religions are not the only true religions that have appeared in the world but are the only ones still existing” *Bahá'í News* No. 105 (February 1937): 2.

86 “The Guardian feels that with intellectuals and students of religion the question of exactly which are the 9 existing religions is controversial, and it would be better to avoid it” (letter dated 28 Oct. 1949 on behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, originally published in *Bahá'í News* No. 228 [Feb. 1950]: 4). See *Lights of Guidance* 415.

destined to avoid the pitfalls of a nine-religion exclusivism.<sup>87</sup> The question remains as to how Bahá'í doctrine will adapt to the sociological fact of religious traditions not specified, yet anticipated in principle and accommodated in practice as the result of conversions from increasingly diverse populations.

Bahá'í universalism is circumscribed by the limited attestation of prophets by name. In principle, Bahá'í doctrine acknowledges that messengers of God were sent to all peoples at one time or other, and that the names of more than a few of them are lost. Analytically, the Bahá'í list of nine explicitly recognised prophets represents two families of religions: the Irano-Semitic (Sabianism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Babism, and the Bahá'í religion) and Sino-Indic traditions (Hindu tradition, Buddhism, and, to a lesser degree in Bahá'í texts, Confucianism). Native spirituality belongs to neither of the two families of religions.

***D. Authority and attestation: the constraints of science on religion***

The learned Bahá'í apologist, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl, formulated what might be considered an enlightened position on historical statements to be found in the Qur'án:

To sum up: first, it is apparent that the stories of Noah and the others are not mentioned in the histories of the great peoples of antiquity, such as the Chinese, the Persians, and the Indians. At the same time, no one can belittle the breadth of their knowledge, the antiquity of the civilizations, the remoteness of their eras, the vastness of their kingdoms, or the wide fame of their attainments. Second, research is unable to establish the authenticity of the author of the Hebrew Pentateuch.

Finally, it is well known that neither the Prophet Muḥammad nor the rest of the prophets ever engaged in disputes with the people about their historical beliefs, but addressed them according to their local traditions. It is therefore necessary to conclude that interpreters and investigators may not come to a final opinion on these matters on the basis of sure knowledge. If the way be barred to individual judgment, then only the religious point of view would remain, and this would consist of worshipful submission to the literal meaning of whatever has issued from the prophets and messengers.<sup>88</sup>

It is clear that prophets and Manifestations of the Cause of God were sent to guide the nations, to improve their characters, and to bring the people nearer to their Source and ultimate Goal. They were not sent as historians, astronomers, philosophers, or natural scientists.<sup>89</sup>

Authoritative Bahá'í pronouncements do place constraints on what Bahá'ís can integrate into their belief system. However, doctrine is theoretically open to refinement provided other Bahá'í principles are brought into relevance. Without diminishing his specific authority, it can be pointed out that the Guardian of the

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87 In *The Bahá'ís*, the Bahá'í International Community publication referred to earlier, this particular significance attached to the number nine is completely omitted (52).

88 *Miracles and Metaphors* 14.

89 ***Ibid.* 9.**

Bahá'í Faith, Shoghi Effendi, was “not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.”<sup>90</sup> Matters of non-Bahá'í history presumably lay outside the jurisdiction of Shoghi Effendi's sphere of conferred infallibility (principally interpretive, moral, and legislative). For example, in 1979, I discovered that the source behind Shoghi Effendi's statement on the Nazarenes in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, page 57—indeed, the entire first paragraph—was based primarily, if not solely, on Chapter 15 of Edward Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Sound and responsible use of “source criticism” as a heuristic tool in studying Bahá'í texts need not diminish their power to inspire nor their normative value.

As a general rule, Shoghi Effendi left questions of history open to historians. Various records by pilgrims who visited Shoghi Effendi in the Holy Land present a man who had cultivated a love of scholarship, and who kept a keen interest in it as time and resources permitted. In a letter written on his behalf to an individual believer on 14 April 1941, the Guardian, commenting on the problem of assigning specific dates to prophets of old, stated that “such matters, as no reference occurs to them in the Teachings, are left for students of history and religion to resolve and clarify.” Another statement may be cited as corroborative: “There are no dates in our teachings regarding the actual dates of the Prophets of the Adamic Cycle; so we cannot give any. Tentatively we can accept what historians may consider accurate” (25 November 1950). On the basis of these statements, the Research Department in a memorandum to the Universal House of Justice concludes: “Because the Writings of the Faith contain no exact information regarding dates of Dispensations prior to that of Muḥammad, Bahá'ís can accept the conclusions of scholars, bearing in mind that there is often disagreement among the scholars themselves on such matters.”<sup>91</sup> Sacred history is admittedly a grey area, because it is difficult to sort out history from hagiography.<sup>92</sup> Shoghi Effendi was categorically opposed to doctrine hardening into creeds.<sup>93</sup>

90 “The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are strictly related to the Cause and interpretations of the Teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc.” (letter written on behalf of the Guardian cited in a letter from the Universal House of Justice to an individual dated 25 July 1979).

91 Memorandum dated 24 May 1988, “Questions Relayed by the Spiritual Assembly of Mitcham,” 2.

92 See J. Cole, “Problems of Chronology in Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom,” *World Order* 13 (Spring 1979): 24–39, a groundbreaking piece of source criticism that sparked a vigorous controversy following its publication.

93 “We should, however, be careful, as you mention in your letter, not to make this system develop into a hard and fast creed or form. The Cause is pure and free from such things and it ought to be the task of the friends to keep it broad and progressive... It should therefore be the duty of the assemblies everywhere to see that, though certain temporary measures are taken to further the Cause, they do not develop into hard and fast creeds” (Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny: The Messages of the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'í Community of the British Isles* (continued...))

#### **IV. Universals and particulars**

##### ***A. The last frontier of universalism?***

Typologically, is it possible for Bahá'í doctrine to give qualified recognition to such figures as Quetzalcoátl and Deganawida as "traditional Manifestations of God" without an ontological commitment to the dual criteria of historicity and spiritual authenticity? I think that this is precisely what has already happened in the case of Bahá'í homefront pioneers who have interacted closely with native cultures. The Bahá'í warrant of authenticity has been accorded to Kṛṣṇa. On the same grounds, can Bahá'í universalism accept the "facts" of oral tradition to reflect a more profound sensitivity to the spiritual history of the New World?

Bahá'ís need not go so far as to claim Quetzalcoátl as a New World Christ (but not Jesus Christ as Latter Day Saints suggest), nor Deganawida as a prophet and statesman like a New World Muḥammad. The questions being raised here cannot be resolved in this study. But, for all evangelising religions in North America, native spirituality is an issue, one that is very much alive in mission fields today. The authenticity of Deganawida does not rise or fall in relation to Bahá'í acceptance or rejection. What is at issue is Bahá'í universalism.

The implications of official Bahá'í recognition of native Messengers of God do not entail syncretism or doctrinal compromise. Inclusion of native Messengers of God in Bahá'í salvation history represents the logical conclusion of the presence of aboriginal Bahá'ís and their native sacred ceremonies that is a distinctive feature of many large Bahá'í gatherings in Canada. The Canadian Bahá'í community, it may be said, is becoming increasingly sensitised to indigenous peoples. Sooner or later, this may need to be reflected in Bahá'í doctrine.

Just as doctrine does not provide an absolute warrant for historicity, historicity is by no means the sole criterion for authenticity. However, it is one of the criteria.

##### ***B. Synchronic and diachronic models of progressive revelation***

If Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl had acknowledged the existence of two separate and unrelated streams of religious tradition, two relative solitudes, what Cole has termed the "Judaic" and the "Indic," religions of the New World represent neither stream. To suggest that native Amerindian religions are somehow lost tribes of Sabians is reductionist in the extreme. The Research Department of the Universal House of Justice broached this problem when in 1988 it drew attention to the following statement from one of the well-known tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "In cycles gone by, though harmony was established, yet, owing to the absence of means, the unity of all mankind could not have been achieved. Continents remained widely divided, nay even among the peoples of one and the same continent association and interchange of thought were well-nigh impossible.

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93 (...continued)  
[London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981] 422–23).

Consequently, intercourse, understanding and unity amongst all the peoples and kindreds of the earth were unattainable...."<sup>94</sup> This idea trades on the observation that societies on separate continents functioned as distinct social worlds with independent religious traditions. While there are recorded utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the effect that all Manifestations of God came from the East, such a diffusionist theory does not logically exclude the appearance of great spiritual teachers subsequent to any migration that may have taken place over an ancient Asiatic land bridge.

This, in turn, invites formal consideration of non-Irano/Semitic and non-Sino/Indic religious traditions along with their respective founders in those traditions which ascribe their origins to such founders. On the basis of other texts in addition to the one just cited, the Research Department, on behalf of the Universal House of Justice, concluded: "In light of everything above, it would appear possible that Manifestations of God have lived simultaneously in different areas of the globe..."<sup>95</sup> This statement is remarkable in that it theoretically allows for formal recognition, at least in principle, of religious traditions outside the Irano-Semitic family.

A more enlightened doctrinal modification might be possible on the basis of a history of civilizations, in which human societies might be seen as undergoing asymmetrical developments. In their respective courses of social evolution, spiritual traditions may be seen as endemic, distinct, and independent of each other, except perhaps for certain universal features (phenomenological, not essentialist). Being virtually cut off from the East prior to Columbus (subsequent to any prehistoric migrations), religious history in the Americas evolved independently of Jesus and Muḥammad, such that revelations from God to the Americas were not mediated through Asia. Too narrow a Bahá'í conception of Progressive Revelation would require that, in theory and assuming a prior date for Zoroaster, a Zoroastrian would be obliged to believe in the Buddha as next in the succession of prophets. A corollary of such a view would imply that the New World was bereft of its own prophets during the Dispensations of Christ and Muḥammad.

### *C. 'Abdu'l-Bahá on native messengers of God*

The text presented below has the potential for validating what has already been intuited by Bahá'í pioneers all along, that native spirituality ought to take its place alongside the great world religions as part of the world's spiritual heritage. Bahá'í doctrine is not, in principle, diminished were it to recognise a rose in a different soil, in this case, the New World. While it is not my purpose to argue the merits or demerits of such a position, I can call attention to a text which has not heretofore been brought to bear on the Bahá'í doctrine of Progressive

94 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Seven Candles of Unity," in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 38.

95 Memorandum dated 24 May 1988, "Questions Relayed by the Spiritual Assembly of Mitcham," 3.



Revelation as it relates to a continent which, Mormon claims notwithstanding, has had no historical interaction with Irano-Semitic religions or with Sino-Indic traditions in its pre-Columbian history.<sup>96</sup>

To wit, in his compendium of Bahá'í teachings, *'Amr va K̄halq* ("Command and Creation), Fāḍil Mázandarání refers to a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá addressed to a certain Amir Khan of Tehran. The gist of this Tablet is this: in times past, the Call of God (*nidá-yi iláhi*), referring to ancient Messengers of God, had assuredly been raised among the people of North America (*ahl-i amrík*), though most of the teachings have been forgotten. As to translation, the Universal House of Justice has provided the following authorised translation of the central portion of the Tablet:

In ancient times the people of America were, through their northern regions, close to Asia, that is, separated from Asia by a strait. For this reason, it hath been said that crossing had occurred. There are other signs which indicate communication.

As to places whose people were not informed of the appearance of Prophets, such people are excused. In the Qur'án it hath been revealed: "We will not chastise them if they had not been sent a Messenger" (Q. 17:15).

Undoubtedly in those regions the Call of God must have been raised in ancient times, but it hath been forgotten now<sup>97</sup> (*al-battih dar án şafahát níz dar azmanih-yi-qadímih*<sup>98</sup> *vaqít nidá-yi-iláhi buland gashthih va-lákin hál farámúsh shudih ast*<sup>99</sup>).

In this particular context, the expression "Call of God" (*nidá-yi iláhi*) is a transparent reference to Prophets of God. The expression, the "Call of God," is a stock allusion to revelation, as in Bahá'u'lláh's poetic description of the Báb's revelation: "The divine call (*nidá-yi iláhi*) of the Celestial Herald from beyond the Veil of Glory."<sup>100</sup> Adduced in the text translated above is a quranic verse which 'Abdu'l-Bahá cites indicating that God would not judge a people unto whom no Messenger (*rasúl*; *Amr va K̄halq* 2: 46) had come. Knowledge of God, according to Bahá'í doctrine, is necessarily mediated by chosen Revealers. This coded validation of Native Messengers of God might suggest a separate and distinct spiritual history in a world far removed from Abrahamic tradition.

However, at the present time, the language of this tablet is not specific enough to warrant a positive ruling from the House of Justice, which writes:

The Bahá'í Teachings do not explicitly confirm, nor do they rule out, the possibility that Messengers of God have appeared in the Americas. In the absence of a clear Text the

96 I will not deal with questions of prehistory in this study.

97 Research Department Memorandum, dated 16 May 1996.

98 I have slightly amended the text here due to a misplaced *hamza* above *qadima*. The *hamza* must surely have been intended for *azmanih*. The transliteration here reflects modern Tehran pronunciation, instead of *azmina*. See H. Wehr, *Arabic-English Dictionary* (Ithaca, New York: Spoken Language Services, 1976) 382.

99 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *apud* Fāḍil-i-Mázandarání, *Amr va K̄halq* (Germany: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1985) 2: 46.

100 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, tr. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1931/1970) 239; Persian text, Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán: Book of Certitude* (Bahá'í Verlag, 1980) 186, line 3.

Universal House of Justice has no basis for issuing the kind of statement you propose which would confirm, "in principle, that God sent Manifestations to the indigenous peoples of the Americas."<sup>101</sup>

In a recorded utterance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was reported to have said that all of the Manifestations of God came from Asia. A methodological caveat is in order here: Citations from *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* require verification (location of the Persian original). Even if 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that all Prophets of God came from Asia is authentic, I do not think that this constrains or overrules His authenticated statement in *Amr va Khalq* that the "Call of God" was raised "in" the Americas. The names of Moses, Christ, and Muḥammad were unknown to native traditions. Thus, native peoples in the Western hemisphere had no Qur'án, Evangel or Torah. Yet they did have their "Call of God," according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's pronouncement.

#### ***D. Universalising universalism***

What is the status of this particular pronouncement, which, admittedly, exists in splendid isolation? Its implications are clear, and, in relation to the paradigm bias of Semiticentrism, the statement is quite profound. This Bahá'í validation of native Messengers of God suggests a separate and distinct spiritual history in a world far removed from Abrahamic tradition. Thus, a Bahá'í pamphlet incorporating such a position might look like this:

#### **Progressive Revelation**

##### **\* Messengers of God to First Nations**

**Abraham**

**Krishna**

**Moses**

**Zoroaster**

**Buddha**

**Jesus**

**Muḥammad**

**The Báb**

**Bahá'u'lláh**

\* Sacred tradition names such Messengers as Deganawida, Quetzalcoátl and Viracocha (Iroquois, Toltec, Inca traditions in North, Central, and South America).

From silence, we conclude that the question of the authenticity of native spirituality was not explicitly addressed during Shoghi Effendi's ministry (1921–1957) as Guardian of the Bahá'í world. Though the Bahá'í stricture

101 From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice dated 16 May 1996.

against adding names to the succession of prophets after Christ attested in the Abrahamic faiths would inevitably frustrate any Bahá'í attempt to enshrine a post-Christian native culture hero, such a list might be open-ended with respect to principle. Native traditions pose their own difficulties in attestation, especially where accounts vary and when such traditions betray Christian influence, and, more recently, Euroamerican influence at the hands of anthropologists and the press as well.<sup>102</sup> It could be argued that such historical uncertainties are not worse than problems surrounding the historicity of Kṛṣṇa, for example.

In terms of existing Bahá'í policy, the possibility for doing so remains open. Extending formal Bahá'í recognition to local culture heroes is for national Bahá'í councils to decide upon as circumstances warrant. The Universal House of Justice is disinclined to legislate definitively on such matters, letting wisdom dictate such decisions in the those Bahá'í communities challenged by new mission fields, as it were. The Universal House of Justice writes:

Your nineteenth point deals with the possibility of producing a teaching aid which would include references to Messengers of God sent to "native peoples". It is normally left to the discretion of each National Assembly to decide what is included in the literature for teaching to be used in areas under its jurisdiction. Whatever step the National Spiritual Assemblies may take in this regard, if reference is made to individuals described as Messengers of God in the traditions of various tribes and peoples, care will have to be exercised that these are clearly distinguished from those whose prophethood is attested in the Bahá'í Writings.<sup>103</sup>

This policy has a certain flexibility and at the same time a constraint. Shoghi Effendi's caveat against adding names of Messengers of God not attested in the Qur'án has, more or less, fixed the Bahá'í roster of "Manifestations of God" to the nominal exclusion of any other. In 1994 in Boston, this constraint was debated following the presentation of a draft of the present paper. A prominent Bahá'í official (who wishes to remain anonymous for the purposes of this discussion) argued that Bahá'ís should not be too dogmatic about that particular constraint considering that the Guardian's sphere of conferred infallibility was, strictly speaking, confined to three areas of sacred responsibility: (1) translation of the Bahá'í sacred texts; (2) interpretations of those Writings (a procedure also involved in translation); and (3) the development of the administrative structure of the Faith. Having himself disclaimed infallibility outside of these three spheres of authority, Shoghi Effendi's historical pronouncements might actually allow for a more nuanced understanding when other Bahá'í principles and texts are brought into relevance, such as the re-discovered text in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirmed (according to one reading of the text) that Messengers of God were indeed sent to North America.

At issue here is not the question of the *existence* of other Messengers of God

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102 See Jordan Paper, "Methodological Controversies in the Study of Native American Religions," *Studies in Religion / Sciences Religieuses* 22.3 (1993): 365-377.

103 The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 January 1990 to an individual believer.

not attested in the Bahá'í writings, but to the problem of attestation itself. In principle, a Bahá'í can certainly affirm that Messengers of God have indeed been sent to all peoples, according to Bahá'í belief, but that there is simply no conclusive way to attest legendary culture heroes individually. Under no circumstances does this prevent a real appreciation of such legends, and of the spiritual and cultural values enshrined in them. Thus, Bahá'í authorities may consider adding the *category* of (rather than *names* of) Messengers of God to First Nations, or Messengers of God to Indigenous Peoples. The problem now is no longer the *principle*, but rather the question of *names*.

Deganawida presents a unique case for Bahá'ís because there is evidence for his historicity, as reflected in a scholarly consensus. This is not to say that the “historical Deganawida” is possible to recover. The fact that Deganawida came after Muḥammad need not pose an insurmountable difficulty, since native spirituality has had no historical connection with the Abrahamic stream of revelation. Diffusionist theories may explain the transmission of some vestiges of ancient native spirituality, but such diffusion does not predetermine subsequent developments. Though Islam is a universal religion and was always so potentially, its presence in the New World is relatively late and Bahá'ís cannot expect Amerindians to have accepted Islam when they had no knowledge of it. While having appeared long after Muḥammad, yet Deganawida came prior to the advent of Islam in North America. The Qur'án is not universal in its particulars. And despite the universal features of its salvation history, the quranic universe did not include the New World at the time of its revelation.

Bahá'í theophanology might one day come to terms with the historical fact of non-Irano/Semitic and non-Sino/Indic streams of religion—religions that may have their own claims to authenticity. Phenomenologically, Deganawida ranks alongside Muḥammad as a prophet and a statesman. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh and Deganawida are comparable in that both figures strove to bring about a “Great Peace” among nations. This phenomenological observation is not a faith statement. The Bahá'í Faith cannot claim Deganawida as its own. It can, however, elect to recognise the place of this Iroquois spiritual genius within the world's sacred history, without romanticisation. Once native spirituality, in its noblest forms, is reconciled with and assimilated to the Bahá'í doctrine of Progressive Revelation, the Bahá'í worldview may achieve a more universal universalism .

