

Foreword – Some Answered Question, Fifth Edition

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



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The spread of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh to the West, in the closing decade of the nineteenth century, soon gave rise to a reciprocal eastward movement: Within a few short years the first groups of Western pilgrims arrived in the prison city of 'Akká, where the earthly life and ministry of the Author of the Faith had come to a close and where 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Centre of His Covenant, continued to reside. One of the most outstanding figures among those early pilgrims was Laura Clifford Barney, the daughter of a socially prominent family of scholars and artists from Washington, D.C. She was introduced to the new Faith by May Bolles Maxwell in Paris around 1900 and soon thereafter made the first of what would be many successive visits to 'Akká.

These were the most perilous and dramatic years of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry, when He was confined within the walls of the prison city by the Ottoman authorities, subjected to continual surveillance, and confronted with the constant threat of further exile or of execution. Under such circumstances of stricture and suspicion, it was dangerous to receive visitors of any kind, let alone host prominent Western guests. Yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá was determined to nurture the seeds of faith so recently germinated. Thus, in the heart of this dark period, during the years 1904–1906, Miss Barney was able to make several extended visits, sometimes for weeks or months at a time, during which she was privileged to join Him on numerous occasions and to pose questions on a wide range of subjects. Many of the conversations took place at the lunch table. Arrangements were made for one of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sons-in-law, or for one of His three secretaries of that time, to take down in Persian the text of His replies. From the resulting collection of notes a selection was made; 'Abdu'l-Bahá then corrected these notes twice in His own hand, sometimes substantially revising them in the process as well as carefully reviewing the final wording.



TRANSLATION

At the completion of the selection and revision process, three different first editions of *Some Answered Questions* were released by major publishing houses in 1908: the original Persian text by E. J. Brill in Holland; Miss Barney's English translation by Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co. in London; and a French translation by Hippolyte Dreyfus (whom Miss Barney later married) by Ernest Leroux in Paris.

A brief perusal of the Table of Contents conveys a glimpse of the breadth of the subject matter covered. Part 1 includes a set of introductory talks on the influence exerted throughout human history by the Founders of some of the world religions, as well as several chapters elucidating certain prophecies of the Bible. Part 2 offers fresh interpretations of essential elements of Christian doctrine, such as baptism, the Trinity, the Eucharist, and the resurrection of Christ. Part 3 concerns the powers and conditions of the Manifestations of God—Their unique station in the world, the source of Their knowledge and influence, and the cyclical nature of Their appearance on the stage of history. Part 4 addresses the origins, powers, and conditions of man, including the implications of human evolution on earth, the immortality of the soul, the nature of the mind, and the connection between the soul and the body. Part 5 concludes with miscellaneous topics, from practical subjects such as labour relations and the punishment of criminals to more abstruse topics such as reincarnation and the Sufi notion of the unity of existence.

Broad and wide-ranging as the topics treated in *Some Answered Questions* may be, the book was not intended to be an exhaustive exposition of a self-contained system of thought, as attested by the volume's title. A number of fundamental teachings of the Faith are, therefore, not explicitly mentioned. Moreover, in the course of the months and years that the talks were given, the same topic would sometimes be addressed from different perspectives in separate conversations, with the result that the concepts required to fully understand a given subject may be spread across different chapters, or the contents of a subsequent chapter may form the basis for the understanding of an earlier one. Finally, it should also be noted that, although 'Abdu'l-Bahá reviewed and corrected the text, He did not attempt in the process to alter the basic form of the replies or to reorganize and consolidate the material. To develop a fuller picture of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exposition of a given subject, then, the attentive reader should consider any chapter within the context of the entire book, and the book within the larger context of the entire body of the Bahá'í Teachings.

A notable case in point is the treatment of the subject of the evolution of species, which is taken up explicitly in Part 4, and which must be understood in light of several Bahá'í teachings, especially the principle of the harmony of science and religion. Religious belief should not contradict science and reason. A certain reading of some of the passages found in Chapters 46–51 may lead some believers to personal conclusions that contradict modern science. Yet the Universal House of Justice has explained that Bahá'ís strive to reconcile their understanding of the statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with

established scientific perspectives, and therefore it is not necessary to conclude that these passages describe conceptions rejected by science, for example, a kind of “parallel” evolution that proposes a separate line of biological evolution for the human species parallel to the animal kingdom since the beginning of life on earth.

A careful review of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statements in this volume and in other sources suggests that His concern is not with the mechanisms of evolution but with the philosophical, social, and spiritual implications of the new theory. His use of the term “species”, for example, evokes the concept of eternal or permanent archetypes, which is not how the term is defined in contemporary biology. He takes into account a reality beyond the material realm. While ‘Abdu’l-Bahá acknowledges elsewhere the physical attributes that human beings share in common with the animal and that are derived from the animal kingdom, in these talks He emphasizes another capacity, a capacity for rational consciousness, that distinguishes man from the animal and that is not found in the animal kingdom or in nature itself. This unique capacity, an expression of the human spirit, is not a product of the evolutionary process, but exists potentially in creation. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “...since man was produced ten or a hundred thousand years ago from the same earthly elements, with the same measures and quantities, the same manner of composition and combination, and the same interactions with other beings—it follows that man was exactly the same then as exists now”. “And if a thousand million years hence,” He goes on to say, “the component elements of man are brought together, measured out in the same proportion, combined in the same manner, and subjected to the same interaction with other beings, exactly the same man will come into existence.” His essential argument, then, is not directed towards scientific findings but towards the materialist assertions that are built upon them. For Bahá’ís, the science of evolution is accepted, but the conclusion that humanity is merely an accidental branch of the animal kingdom—with all its attendant social implications—is not.

Over the years since the original publication of *Some Answered Questions*, it has become increasingly clear that the translation would benefit from a careful and thorough revision. Miss Barney, as she herself stated, was a student of the Persian language and, however able, could not have entirely mastered its intricacies; and she could not of course have taken advantage of the brilliant illumination that was later to be cast upon the Sacred Texts of the Faith by the authoritative translations of Shoghi Effendi. Moreover, only a few necessary corrections had been made to the English translation during the course of its many reprintings, leaving it largely unchanged from the text of the first edition.

The centenary of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s journeys to the West, then, presents a fitting occasion both to honour Laura Clifford Barney’s imperishable contribution as the primary catalyst and first translator of this volume, and to present an improved translation of these “priceless explanations”. The main objective of this retranslation has been to

better represent the substance and the style of the original, in particular by capturing more clearly the subtleties of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations, approximating more closely a style that is at once conversational and elevated, and by rendering more consistently the philosophical terms used throughout the text. While not bound by the original translation, this version nevertheless strives to retain many of its elegant expressions and felicitous turns of phrase.

Since its release, *Some Answered Questions* has been an authoritative repository of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's profound insight and an indispensable component of every Bahá'í library. Shoghi Effendi observed that the book expounds the basic beliefs of the Cause in a simple and clear language and regarded its content as essential for grasping the significance and implications of the Bahá'í Revelation. In *Some Answered Questions*, he wrote, one "will find the clue to all the perplexing questions that agitate the mind of man in his search after true knowledge. The more this Book is read with care and patience, the greater are its revelations, and the more complete the understanding of its inner truth and significance." It is hoped that the new translation will assist future generations to access this inexhaustible mine "of knowledge regarding basic spiritual, ethical, and social problems".