author insists that religious diversity need not have to inevitably lead to conflict, and thus suggests the possibility of learning from local ways of negotiating multiple identities through dialogue or simply through shared struggles for sheer survival.

Yoginder Sikand


The Hidden Words is an English translation of al-Kalimát al-Maknúnah of the meditational verses of Mírzá Ḥusayn ‘Alí Núrí (1817–1892), better known by the creed title of Bahá’ulláh (Glory of God), being the founder of the Bahá’í faith. Of the original verses seventy one are in Arabic and eighty two in Persian.

Of all the works of Bahá’ulláh, this book is considered to be the best. Walking along the banks of River Tigris, Iraq, in 1858, wrapt in meditation, Bahá’ulláh reflected in this small volume of verses on the eternal relationship between God and Man, on the purpose of life and the obstacles that lie before man in his journey along the spiritual path.

The translator of this book is Shoghi Effendi Rábání (1897–1957), who was appointed a Guardian of the Bahá’í community by Bahá’ulláh’s eldest son and successor, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), better known as ‘Abd al-Bahá’, a title chosen by himself. Educated at the Catholic schools in Haifa and Beirut, Shoghi graduated in arts from the Syrian Protestant College (a predecessor of the American University of Beirut) in 1918 and after working as ‘Abd al-Bahá’s chief secretary for about two years, he joined Balliol College, Oxford University, in 1920, studying Political Science and Economics, and seeking to perfect his English. His student career was, however, cut short by the sudden death of his maternal grandfather, ‘Abd al-Bahá’ in 1921, when he was called back to Haifa, and appointed Wáli Amrá’lláh (Guardian of the Cause of God) according to ‘Abd al-Bahá’s will after putting aside the original line of succession indicated in Bahá’ulláh’s Book of Covenant. Shoghi by now had become as proficient in English as in Persian and Arabic which he had learnt in his childhood. He could also speak French. Taking up the reins of
leadership of the Bahá’í community, Shoghi concentrated all his energies on
the world-wide expansion of Bahá’ísm through extensive correspondence with
the Bahá’ís and translation of Bahá’í literature, comprising mostly the writings
of Bahá’u’lláh into English for which he had been grooming himself from his
early years. Of the 17,500 letters written by him and his secretary, fifteen
collections of his English letters have already been published. A few short
pieces of his translations were published in 1920s along with the *Hidden
Words*. Then during 1931–1941, he published four volumes of Bahá’u’lláh’s
writings, together with English translation of Nabil’s history of the Bábís,
titled *The Dawn Breakers* (1932). Many passages from Bahá’í religious books
translated into English by him were incorporated in his letters.

*Al-Kalimát al-Maknûnah*, translated by Shoghi under the title *The Hidden
Words*, has been translated into sixty-nine languages, a proof of its popularity
as well as of the Bahá’í missionary zeal. It is a treatise in poetic form on the
religious experience of man, revolving around his constant struggle to acquire
spiritual perfection, as perceived by Bahá’u’lláh. Interwoven with elderly
counsel and gentle remonstrance, garnered from the various founts of human
wisdom, these verses seem to spring from the depths of a sensitive heart. Borne
on the wings of poesy, the reader is carried on a journey from this earthly
world to the hidden corridors of Bahá’u’lláh’s spiritual realm.

The mode of address is also unique. In the Arabic verses, the readers are
invited to the message by the words:

O Son of Man! O Son of Being! O Son of Spirit! O Son of the Supreme! O Son of
Beauty! O Children of the Divine and Invisible Essence! O Son of Him that
Stood by His Own in the Kingdom of Himself!

In the Persian section, in addition to the above words, people are
addressed in the following way:

O Ye people that have minds to know and ears to hear! O Friends! O Son of
justice! O fleeting shadow! O Son of desire! O man of two visions! O my
children! O essence of negligence! O comrades! O dwellers in the highest
paradise! O ye that are lying as dead as the couch of heedlessness! O dwellers in
the city of love! O ye that are foolish, yet have a name to be wise! O ye
seemingly fair but inwardly foul! O son of bounty! O bond slave of the world! O
son of my handmaid! O my borer! O befriended stranger! O dwellers of my
paradise! O my servant! O companion of my Throne! O brethren in the path! O
quintessence of passion! O rebellious ones! O emigrants! O weed that springeth
out of dust! O children of fancy! O children of Adam! O son of worldliness! O
children of vainglory!

A cursory glance over these evocations would easily indicate the
difference of the contents of the Arabic and Persian pieces. One may note that
while the pieces in the Arabic section are generally full of divine qualities of love, kindness and compassion, those of Persian section abound in expressions of divine wrath and anger. Moreover, while the language in the Arabic section, in consonance with its contents, is soft, mellow and gentle, in the Persian section it is somewhat harsh and a bit jarring on the senses of the reader, again, in keeping with the nature of its contents.

Most of these pieces are reminiscent of, and seem to draw upon, at least in meaning if not in form and letter, verses from the Qur’an, traditions of the Prophet (peace be on him), Arabic or Persian sayings, and famous verses of Arabic and Persian poetry. For example, the words: “Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself” remind us of the verses 4–5 in Sūrah al-Ṭīn in the Qur’an. Likewise, the words: “Know ye in truth that wealth is a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire … Well is it then with him, who, being rich, is not hindered by his riches from the eternal kingdom …” are suggestive of verses 15–16 of Sūrah al-Ṭaghābun.

Couched in majestic prose, this English translation of the book with its contents borrowed mostly from the inspirational religious tradition of the past has made a remarkable contribution to the literature of this genre. Impressed by its literary beauty, George Townsend, sometime Canon of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, Dublin and Archdeacon of Clonfert and an eminent scholar has eulogised the Hidden Words as follows:

It has the sweep, the force, the freshness of an original work. It is rich with imagery, laden with thought, throbbing with emotion. Even at the remove of a translation one feels the strength and majesty of the style and marvels at the character of a writing which combines so warm and tender a loving kindness with such dignity and elevation.

In short, in the tradition of all great poets, the verses in this book are in the form of an appeal, an earnest exhortation of a kind heart for achieving an imperishable and everlasting sovereignty, filling the soul with the spirit of life, striving to be blessed with the destined reunion with the eternal essence and a heavenly home in the kingdom above. Interspersed with the gems of wisdom and mystic experience, man is invited to transcend the earthly frontiers and enter the celestial domain of divine bounty, radiance and favour.

Ali Raza Naqvi