

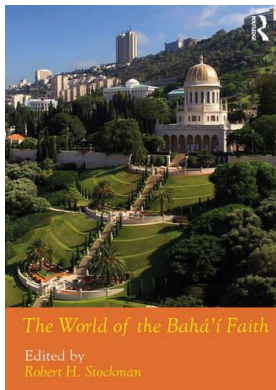
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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God, Revelation, and Manifestation

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14

GOD, REVELATION, AND MANIFESTATION

Vargha Bolodo-Taefi

Introduction

This chapter explores key themes in Bahá'í theology such as the absolute transcendence of God, the Essence of God, the names and attributes of God, the apophatic theology of the Bahá'í Faith, God's unknowability, the revelation of God, emanation and manifestation, and the Manifestation of God. With the exploration of each theme, an aspect of the Bahá'í approach to the recognition of God is introduced. Considering the novel features of Bahá'í theology and its consequences for age-old questions of religion, the chapter concludes that Bahá'í theology revolutionizes the terminology, conceptual framework, scope, and implications of prophethood and revelation that existed in previous traditions.

God

The Essence of God

Many religious traditions state that the purpose and meaning of human existence is attaining the presence of God (Matthew 5:8; Psalm 27:8, 145:18; Jeremiah 29:13; Qur'an 13:2, 29:5, 29:23). Nevertheless, they stress God's inaccessibility and exaltation and assert that no knowledge of the invisible God is possible for the human mind (Aquinas 1955: 30; Saint Augustine, book I, chaps. 1 and 4, book VII, chap. 1; Qur'an 42:11, 37:180, and 112:1–4; Al-Kindí, in Abú Rídah 1950: 160–161; Avicenna 2014: 40–66; Ibnu'l-'Arabí 1999: vol. 1, chap. 3 and vol. 3, chap. 172; idem 2016: 48–56). Likewise, they proclaim that all created things are signs of God, yet they maintain that there is an essential separation and distinction between God and His creation. These statements pose ontological and epistemological paradoxes in the existential quest of humanity (Saiedi 2000: 162–163) and manifest themselves as two extremes in philosophical and mystical thought (idem 1995: 40). Notwithstanding these assertions of God's transcendence by theologians, some Christians and mystics believe that it is possible to know the Essence of God and to become one with Him (Wainwright). In contrast, philosophers like Feuerbach (Gooch) and Camus (1955) define existence in empirical, material, rational, or human terms; deny God; and consider human life to be futile and meaningless.

Then there are those in the middle, who believe in God but who are also faced with similar contradictions in their theology, whether they define God in immanent or transcendent terms.

Some Christians, for example, follow the doctrine of the Incarnation as articulated by the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) and worship God as incarnated in the human form of Jesus Christ. Some Aztecs, Hindus, Indigenous Australians, and Celtic pagans believe in gods that appear in a variety of animal and other living forms. Many followers of religion *imagine* God, and, insofar as imagination is a creation of the human mind, in so doing, they worship their own creation, not their Creator. Others, like Maimonides (1910: chap. LVIII), Aquinas (1920: part 1, Q 3), some Shi'ite thinkers (Amir-Moezzi), and Kierkegaard (1944: 139), resort to apophatic theology in order to preserve the transcendence of God. Advocates of the absolute transcendence of God believe in an invisible God, denounce all names and attributes in relation to Him, and exalt Him above all knowledge, understanding, and experience. With such a definition, however, God has nothing to do with humanity, and a belief or disbelief in a transcendent God makes no difference in life. Such a God is beyond all human conception of existence, time, and space; He cannot be obeyed, worshipped, or proved. To the human mind, this definition is similar to the definition of non-existence. To overcome this, some separate God's Essence from His names and attributes and state that the latter can be known and experienced (Saiedi 1995: 51–53). But since God's names and attributes must be pre-existent, not originated, this belief leads to a multiplicity of pre-existences, which is tantamount to plurality in relation to God.

Bahá'ís believe in a God that is absolutely transcendent above creation and inaccessible. He is beyond any notion of descent and ascent, habitation, and return (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* no. 19; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* nos. 27, 37, 54, 59, and 82). He does not become incarnate in anything (Bahá'u'lláh, *Call* para. 2:45). 'No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 70). His realm is free from time and space (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons* 167). Any mention of separation and union, or nearness and remoteness, in relation to Him is, therefore, merely figurative (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* no. 19). To liken Him to anything or to view anything as being of His kind is out of keeping with His station (Dávudí 2020: 60).

Bahá'ís assert that God is a necessary, simple, single, nondelimited, and incorporeal Being, whereas all created things are contingent, compounded, plural, delimited, and corporeal. His simplicity necessitates that He is not composed of any constituent elements and His nondelimitation precludes all forms of association or relationship (Bahá'u'lláh, *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7:142). Bahá'ís, therefore, believe that there is a fundamental separation and distinction between God and His creation ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 17) and suggest that where religious texts, including the Bahá'í Writings, speak of drawing near to God, finding a path towards Him, or turning to Him, one must look for their inner meaning and true purpose (Dávudí 2020: 63).

The essential names and attributes of God

The Bahá'í Writings stress that God is invisible, inaccessible, unknowable, and ineffable (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* no. 84; *Selections* no. 30). Therefore, as He is in Himself, He cannot be called by any names, nor can He be regarded as possessing any attributes (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 102, 113). Confessing this belief, Bahá'ís state daily in their Long Obligatory Prayer 'I testify that Thou hast been sanctified above all attributes and holy above all names' (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Aqdas* 95). The reason for this assertion is that God's embodiment of human attributes, which are specific and many, would necessitate the limitation of His Essence to specific meanings (Dávudí 2020: 64), its division into various aspects and relationships, and its need of component parts, whereas limitation, plurality, and need are characteristics of created and contingent beings ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 27). Bahá'ís believe, therefore, that God, as He is in His realm, has no names or attributes or, strictly speaking, that His names and attributes are identical with His Essence; otherwise, 'there would be a multiplicity of pre-existences' (ibid.

no. 37). Besides, if the names and attributes of God, as He really is, were not identical with His Essence, they would inevitably be a creation of His Essence and not befitting its station. The belief that God's names and attributes are identical with His Essence is the basis of the apophatic theology of the Bahá'í Faith, which necessitates negating all that is other than God's Essence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

[W]e ascribe certain names and attributes to the reality of the Divinity and praise Him for His sight, His hearing, His power, His life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes not to affirm the perfections of God, but to deny that He has any imperfections.

(ibid.)

Bahá'u'lláh also emphasizes that this negation is not bound by the limits of time and that God has always been and will forever remain alone in His station (*Gleanings* no. 78). Therefore, Bahá'ís distinguish between the names and attributes of God, as He is in His realm, and the names and attributes that we ascribe to Him within the limits of our existence in the world of creation in order to worship Him.

God's unknowability

God's ultimate unknowability is a central theme in Bahá'í theology. The Bahá'í Writings are replete with assertions that God is unknowable, inaccessible, and indescribable (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 70; *Gleanings* nos. 26, 124, 148; *Call* paras. 2:45–46; *Summons* 37, 55, 153; *Aqdas* 92, 96; *Tablets* 113; *Prayers* no. CLXXVI). In His talks (*Some Answered Questions* nos. 37, 59; *Paris Talks* no. 5), 'Abdu'l-Bahá sets forth elaborate proofs to demonstrate that we cannot know the reality of God. To comprehend an object, one must first encompass it and contain it within one's mind, but God cannot be contained within the limits of the human mind. Only an imagination of God, which is a creation of the human mind, not the Creator, can be contained within the human mind. Besides, that which is created can never know its Creator, just as a painting can never recognize its painter. Further, because an inferior being does not possess the properties and qualities of a superior being, it cannot understand it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also explains that even in the world of creation, one cannot know the essence of anything but can only recognize it through its names and attributes. Consequently, understanding the Essence of God is beyond human capacity. Further, since the names and attributes of God, as He is, are identical with His Essence, the unknowability of God's Essence is tantamount to the unknowability of His names and attributes in the divine realm. Finally, for the reality of God to be known, He must emerge from His invisible realm and manifest Himself in the visible world of creation. Insofar as God is invisible, He is unknowable.

As will be discussed, statements in the Bahá'í Writings (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* nos. 27, 81) that ascribe names and attributes to God or suggest that we can know God through His names, attributes, and signs refer to our interaction, within the limits of our existence, with the reflection of God's revelation in the world of creation, not to the world of God. We can recognize signs, reflections, or manifestations of the names and attributes of God in the world of creation—and most perfectly through God's chosen Messengers—within the limits of our existence, but we cannot know the names and attributes of God Himself, which are identical with His Essence and therefore unknowable as they really are in the world of God. We can, however, recognize God's signs and reflections in this world and ascribe names and attributes to them in order to praise His perfections. These are names and attributes that we ascribe to God in the

world of creation, within the limits of our existence, not the names and attributes of God as He really is. Therefore, any names and attributes that can be perceived belong to the world of creation, not to the world of God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers* no. CLXXVI). 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Some Answered Questions* no. 37) states:

When we observe the contingent world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection, and thus we say that the sanctified Essence of the Divinity is all-knowing. Weakness is imperfection and power is perfection, and thus we say that that sanctified and divine Essence is all-powerful. It is not that we can understand His knowledge, His sight, His hearing, His power, or His life as they are in themselves: This is assuredly beyond our comprehension....

Transcendence vs. immanence

The Bahá'í Writings stress the absolute transcendence of God. Owing to our ability to interact with the reflections of God's revelation in His creation in this world, as well as individual experiences of the presence of what is believed to be God, some may refer to God as 'immanent'. While this can be a useful concept in some contexts, the Bahá'í Writings never describe God as immanent because such a concept would entail the appearance of the invisible and unknowable Essence of God in this visible, corporeal, and contingent world, which is impossible. Rather, as will be discussed, the revelation of God in the world of creation involves emanation, not manifestation or appearance. Stressing the transcendence of God, Bahá'u'lláh writes: 'To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress' (*Gleanings* no. 19). 'Abdu'l-Bahá further explains: 'For that divine reality to descend into stations and degrees would be tantamount to deficiency, contrary to perfection, and utterly impossible. It has ever been, and will ever remain, in the loftiest heights of sanctity and purity' (*Some Answered Questions* no. 27).

While the idea of divine immanence is a common one, it has several philosophical problems. The first problem is one of ontological-epistemological conflation—the conflation of an ontic understanding of what God *is* with an epistemic understanding of what we can *know* about God. That in the divine realm, God is an invisible, necessary, simple, single, nondelimited, and incorporeal being and is, therefore, transcendent is a statement of the reality of what God *is*. It is an ontological statement about God. To conclude that God, as He is, is unknowable is a statement of epistemology. Likewise, the fact that in the world of creation, we can recognize God through His signs, perfections, names, and attributes that are enshrined within all created things; that we can reflect the light of His revelation, the power of the Divine Spirit and God's bounties and bestowals by purifying the mirror of our heart through worship and service; that we can feel nearer to God in moments of solitude, silence, prayer, meditation, and spiritual rapture; and that we can know God through His chosen Representatives, Who reflect His perfections, names, and attributes in this world, while all true, are all statements of epistemology. To conclude from these facts that God is immanent or that there can be an immanent aspect about Him, however, is a fallacious statement of ontology because it relies on epistemological premises to define an ontological position. How we *know* God and what we *know* about Him in this world, therefore, do not define the reality of what God *is*.

'Abdu'l-Bahá ('Forel') explains this conflation between ontology and epistemology in relation to God in the following words:

[I]t is incumbent upon man to ponder in his heart upon the effusions of the Divine Grace . . . rather than upon the Divine Essence itself. This is the utmost limit for human understanding . . . [T]hese attributes and perfections that we recount of the Divine Essence, these we have derived from the existence and observation of beings, and it is not that we have comprehended the essence and perfection of God.

The second problem is one of logical definition. God is the unknowable Essence that exists in the divine realm. In order for divine immanence or any experience of union with God or of His presence in this world to be real—in other words, in order for the object or the being whose presence we experience to be God—logically, one of the following two scenarios must happen: either God, the necessary, simple, single, nondelimited, and incorporeal Essence in the divine world, must leave His invisible realm, enter the world of creation, and, in so doing, become a contingent, compounded, plural, delimited, and corporeal being—and unavoidably cease to be God—or we must ascend to the invisible realm of God and become a necessary, simple, single, nondelimited, and incorporeal being—and become God. It follows then that the object or the being whose presence we may experience is a creation of our imagination, not our Creator. Therefore, to experience the presence of God or to be united with Him, as He is, we must, of necessity, either strip God of His divinity, claim to be God, or worship a creation of our own imagination as our Creator. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Some Answered Questions* no. 37) states:

It follows that all these names, attributes, laudations, and praises apply to the Manifestations of God Themselves, and that all that we may construe or conceive besides them is sheer delusion, for we can never find a path to the Invisible and Inaccessible. Thus it is said: ‘All that ye vainly believe to have discerned and expressed in your subtlest terms is but a creature like unto you and returneth unto your own selves.’

It is evident that if we attempt to conceive the reality of the Divinity, that conception would be encompassed and our mind would be that which encompasses it—and assuredly that which encompasses is greater than that which is encompassed! Thus it follows that any reality that we might conceive for the Divinity besides that of the holy Manifestations would be mere delusion, as there is no means of approach to that divine Reality which is entirely beyond the reach of the mind. And all that we might conceive is pure imagination.

Consider then how the peoples of the world are circling round their own vain imaginings and worshipping the idols of their own thoughts and fancies, without the least awareness of doing so. They regard these vain imaginings as that Reality which is sanctified above all understanding and exalted beyond every allusion. They consider themselves to be the proponents of the Divine Unity and all others as worshippers of idols, even though idols at least enjoy a mineral existence, whereas the idols of human thoughts and imaginations are sheer illusion and have not even the existence of stones. ‘Take ye good heed, O people of insight!’

Therefore, God cannot remain the necessary, simple, single, nondelimited, and incorporeal Essence in His realm yet His presence, as He is, be experienced in the world of creation. These two scenarios are mutually exclusive. As will be discussed, however, the Bahá’í teachings describe that we can, within the limits of our existence and understanding in this world, recognize the signs and reflections of God in all created beings and, above all, in His chosen Representatives, in the same manner that a painter can be recognized through his or her paintings or an author through his or her writings. By attainment to the presence of God is meant attainment

to the presence of the Representatives of God, Who are His chosen Intermediaries, in the world of creation (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 100). It cannot be said that God must descend into this world in order for us to recognize and worship Him, nor can we equate the signs and reflections of God's perfections in this world with God Himself. Bahá'u'lláh writes (*Gleanings* no. 93):

Let no one imagine that by Our assertion that all created things are the signs of the revelation of God is meant that . . . the Divine Being—magnified be His name and exalted be His glory—is, under any circumstances, comparable unto men, or can, in any way, be associated with His creatures. Such an error hath been committed by certain foolish ones who, after having ascended into the heavens of their idle fancies, have interpreted Divine Unity to mean that all created things are the signs of God, and that, consequently, there is no distinction whatsoever between them. Some have even outstripped them by maintaining that these signs are peers and partners of God Himself. Gracious God! He, verily, is one and indivisible; one in His essence, one in His attributes. Everything besides Him is as nothing when brought face to face with the resplendent revelation of but one of His names, with no more than the faintest intimation of His glory—how much less when confronted with His own Self!

Revelation

Bahá'ís believe that God is the Creator and the animating Source of all beings. All created things come into being by receiving a share of the outpourings of divine revelation. One may feel the ever-present effusions of divine revelation and, therefore, feel close to God or may forget them and grow far from Him. The mention of God's nearness and remoteness in religious texts, then, is not an indication of His presence in this world but relates to the recognition of the outpourings of His revelation in the world of creation and the effusions of His bounties that reach His creation (Dávudí 2020: 82). As previously mentioned, the realm of God is free from any notion of separation, union, nearness, and remoteness ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 93). All that is said to describe God, exalt His station, or worship Him, including through names and attributes that we ascribe to Him, pertains to His revelation in the world of creation and is subject to the limits of human understanding (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* no. 148).

Emanation vs. manifestation

Every created being emanates from God and enjoys a degree of existence according to its station in this emanational procession. The existence of each being, therefore, is an effusion of the grace of God. Should this grace be withheld for a moment, the being will return to non-existence. Owing to its very existence, then, every created being carries a sign of God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 60–61).

The Bahá'í belief completely differs from the views of anthropomorphists and pantheists in that the Bahá'í Writings stress that God does not become incarnate in anything, nor does He manifest Himself as anything. The world of creation emanates from God; it does not manifest Him. The existence of every created thing emanates from God as the Source of existence in an emanational procession and takes a unique form commensurate with its station. It is the difference in stations of the recipients of God's grace that accounts for the plurality and diversity in the world of creation (Dávudí 2020: 84). The effusion of God's grace, however, does not cause

the simple, single, nondelimited, and incorporeal divine reality to be divided into parts, dissolve into forms, or become incarnate in things. The Bahá'í Writings adopt the term 'revelation' to describe this outpouring of God's grace, this emanational procession (Bahá'u'lláh, *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7: 141–142).

Because the Bahá'í concept of revelation relies on 'emanation', as opposed to 'manifestation', in relation to creation, it thereby preserves the absolute transcendence of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Some Answered Questions* nos. 53, 54, 82; *Promulgation* nos. 24, 96) likens the emanation of existence from God to the light of the sun illuminating the world and to speech proceeding from a speaker. The sun shines upon the earth but is reflected in things commensurate with their degrees and stations. A mirror, for instance, reflects the sun more than a stone does. Besides, the emanation of light from the sun and its association with the mirror do not mean that the sun itself descends from its height and enters the mirror. Similarly, when speech proceeds from a speaker, some thought, knowledge, or skill emanates from the speaker and takes a specific form commensurate with the occasion. The existence of speech, therefore, demonstrates the existence of a speaker; it signifies the share of grace emanating from the speaker. It cannot be said, however, that the speaker's soul, thought, or knowledge suffers a decrease and dissolves into the form of speech or leaves the speaker's being and becomes incarnate in speech.

In contrast, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes manifestation as the appearance of a thing in other forms and likens it to the procession of a tree from its seed, in which the seed itself is consumed and becomes manifested in the form of the branches, leaves, and flowers of the tree. Since God does not dissolve into parts, enter into His creation, or take the form of any created being, Bahá'ís, therefore, believe that the created things do not manifest God; they emanate from Him. The world is not a part of God, neither does He enter the world. As Bahá'u'lláh (*Tablets* 60–61) writes:

...God is immeasurably exalted above all things. Every created being however revealeth His signs which are but emanations from Him and not His Own Self. All these signs are reflected and can be seen in the book of existence, and the scrolls that depict the shape and pattern of the universe are indeed a most great book. Therein every man of insight can perceive that which would lead to the Straight Path and would enable him to attain the Great Announcement. Consider the rays of the sun whose light hath encompassed the world. The rays emanate from the sun and reveal its nature, but are not the sun itself. Whatsoever can be discerned on earth amply demonstrateth the power of God, His knowledge and the outpourings of His bounty, while He Himself is immeasurably exalted above all creatures.

As previously mentioned, the effusion of God's grace takes a unique form in each created thing commensurate with its degree of existence and limitation. In this world of plurality and diversity, names and attributes appear in proportion to the different degrees of revelation and existence. Each created being which emanates from the Source of existence and enjoys an individuality thus receives a name and an attribute. All created things, therefore, reflect names and attributes of God. The names and attributes that we imperfect creatures ascribe to God in the world of creation to praise His perfection include sight, hearing, power, might, peace, dominion, patience, independence, speed, health, protection, life, love, creativity, knowledge, beauty, and mercy. In one sense, all the names and attributes indicate a single Reality and are one, inasmuch as they signify the effusion of existence that emanates from God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 71–72, 99; *Gleanings* no. 26; *Call* para. 6:10; *Gems* para. 45; *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7:9, 7:36; *Tabernacle* para. 2:9; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 19). That all beings, owing to their very existence, are recipients

of the universal revelation emanating from God and reflect His names and attributes gives everything a sense of worth and significance. This important fact is the foundation of Bahá'í ethics.

Recognition of God

While Bahá'ís believe that God, as He is, is unknowable, nevertheless, in the limited sense and form that all created things emanate from Him, He can be known in the world of creation. Similarly, while God, as He is in His realm, has no names or attributes, nonetheless, all beings, owing to their existence, reflect the names and attributes of God in the world of creation. To know a created being is, therefore, to find a path to the outpouring emanating from God and to recognize the Invisible in His visible reflection (Dávudí 2020: 91). God can only be known to us limited creatures through what He has created and made visible to us. In this sense, God can be found everywhere and seen in everything (Bahá'u'lláh, Íqán 73, 99; Gems para. 84). Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings* no. 124) writes:

From the exalted source, and out of the essence of His favor and bounty He hath entrusted every created thing with a sign of His knowledge, so that none of His creatures may be deprived of its share in expressing, each according to its capacity and rank, this knowledge. This sign is the mirror of His beauty in the world of creation. The greater the effort exerted for the refinement of this sublime and noble mirror, the more faithfully will it be made to reflect the glory of the names and attributes of God, and reveal the wonders of His signs and knowledge.

While every being, according to its station, testifies to the existence of God, creations that enjoy a greater perfection—that reflect divine revelation more intensely—paint a fuller picture of His existence. God can be found more easily through them (Dávudí 2020: 94). The sun shines upon the earth, but its qualities are reflected better in a mirror than in a stone ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 19; *Promulgation* no. 62).

In the emanational procession of divine revelation, human existence possesses the highest degree of perfection because it receives a greater share of the effusion of existence and embodies all the degrees of creation. While all beings reflect some aspects of God's names, attributes, and perfections according to their various degrees and limits of existence, human reality encompasses all created things, possesses all their perfections, and therefore reflects all the divine names, attributes, and perfections (Bahá'u'lláh, Íqán 72–73; *Gleanings* no. 27; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* no. 5). That is why, while confessing the absolute transcendence of God, sanctifying Him from all comprehension, and exalting Him above any notion of time and space, the Bahá'í Writings (Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic, nos. 58–60) consider the human soul to be the dawning place of the revelation of God, the habitation of His throne, and the seat of His establishment. 'They urge human beings to sanctify and refine this holy seat and cleanse it from the defilement of self and passion so that the light of God may shine upon it', and it may mirror forth His attributes. It is in this sense that one can find God within oneself (Dávudí 2020: 98).

Manifestation

The perfect human

Just as the human species enjoys a higher degree of existence than other created beings, so do the Prophets and Messengers of God have a higher station than the generality of the people.

This superiority is not only in talents and capacities. Human beings cannot attain the station of prophethood or become the recipients of divine revelation through training, education, asceticism, or spiritual quest. The Founders of divine religions have an essential superiority and distinction over the rest of humanity. Theirs is a unique degree of existence to which no one can ascend. Just as the human spirit differentiates human beings from animals, the Holy Spirit distinguishes the Prophets of God from the rest of humankind. These Messengers are members of the human race, but in Them the human soul is associated with the Holy Spirit. They occupy the highest station in the world of creation. Their station is the closest to God, the first to emanate from Him, and the channel through which the rest of creation comes into being (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 73). This first emanation from the Essence of God is a universal reality that is known as the First Intellect, the Primal Will, or the Word of God ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* nos. 38, 42, 53, 54). This reality receives the strongest effusion of God's revelation and, 'even as a clear mirror in which the Sun of Truth is revealed and manifested in the fullness of its attributes and perfections' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *ibid.* no. 27; Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 73), reflects the light of existence upon the rest of the creation (Dávudí 1996: 139–140).

The single pre-existent revelation that has emanated from God in eternity, without becoming plural or limited to the bounds of time, is associated successively with a chosen member of the human species Who acts as the intermediary between God and His creation in every age (*ibid.* 187). These chosen Representatives, also known as the Prophets and Messengers of God, have included Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh.

Manifestations of God

While we cannot know God as He is in His invisible realm, we can know His Representatives Who establish His religion in His name and deliver His message in His stead in the world of creation. Bahá'ís refer to Them as the Manifestations of God and consider knowledge of Them to be the limit of the quest to know God and identical with His knowledge. That They are referred to as the Manifestations of God does not mean that They 'manifest' God as He is in Himself, nor does it suggest that God becomes incarnate in Them or appears in Their form. Their spiritual reality, as well as Their physical bodies, like all created things, emanate from God. They are, however, true mirrors that reflect all the perfections of God in this world and manifest all His names and attributes that exist in the world of creation. Bahá'u'lláh (*Gleanings* no. 21) writes:

The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue forever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Daystars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself. Whoso turneth away from them, hath turned away from God, and whoso disbelieveth in them, hath disbelieved in God. Every one of them is the Way of God that connecteth this world with the realms above, and the Standard of His Truth unto every one in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. They are the Manifestations of God amidst men, the evidences of His Truth, and the signs of His glory.

In Bahá'í theology, the significance of the station of the Manifestations of God is not merely owing to the fact that They institute a set of laws and principles, but also that They embody divine revelation in the world of creation and reflect the emanation of God's effusion to the highest degree. As described previously, the Manifestations of God are, above all, the highest recipients of and the perfect mirrors reflecting the divine outpourings in the world of being. That the Manifestations of God reveal religious laws and principles, prophesy, or warn is a corollary to Their station, not its equivalent or true significance (Saiedi 1995: 83–84).

Manifestations of the names and attributes of God

Since God cannot be known directly, in each age, His Manifestations are made the recipients of His outpourings and the channels of divine grace between God and His creation. By Their revelation, all the names and attributes of God are made manifest. The Manifestations of God are true mirrors that reflect the perfections and bounties of God, just as a spotless mirror fully reflects the light of the sun. If it is said that a perfect mirror manifests the sun, it does not mean that the sun has descended from its height and has become embodied in the mirror ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 37). Bahá'ís, therefore, do not believe that God descends from its transcendent and invisible heights, suffers transformation, is resolved into a visible and contingent form, becomes divided into parts, or becomes incarnate in His Manifestations, in the same manner that a tree proceeds from a seed or a drop from the ocean (*ibid.* no. 54).

Further, inasmuch as names and attributes are not befitting of the realm of God but rather of the world of creation, and insofar as the greatest reflection of these names and attributes is in the Prophets and Messengers of God, Bahá'ís believe that all the divine names and attributes refer to and exist in the Manifestations of God in the first place, even if some of these names and attributes remain hidden according to the requirements of time and place (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 73–74, 100; *Gems* 35; *Summons* 152; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 21; *Some Answered Questions* no. 37; *Promulgation* no. 62). It cannot be said that these names and attributes are granted to some of the Manifestations of God yet withheld from others; They all bear His names and embody His attributes. The Manifestations of God differ, however, in the intensity of Their revelation (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 71, 73–74; *Gleanings* no. 27).

Stations of essential unity and distinction

The Manifestations of God possess two stations: the station of essential unity and the station of distinction. In Their station of essential unity, inasmuch as They are the Primal Will, the Word of God, the First Intellect, and the first creation of God, and insofar as They are associated with the world of God, They are one essence, one soul, and one reality. They can all be called with one name, praised with one attribute, and considered to occupy one station (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 107–108; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* nos. 38–39). Otherwise, to consider Them to be distinct and plural while They are the first emanation from God is to extend plurality to the Essence of God, which is tantamount to blasphemy. The essence of light is one, no matter in how many mirrors or how intensely it may be reflected. The individuality of the Manifestations of God is a corollary of Their human spirit and station, not of the Word of God and His Cause or of the Holy Spirit that is associated with Them (Dávudí 1996: 182). Recognition of the oneness of the Word of God, and consequently of the essential unity of His Manifestations, necessitates acceptance of the oneness of the foundation of all divine religions—a fundamental tenet of the Bahá'í Faith.

But the Manifestations of God also possess the station of distinction. Inasmuch as revelation, an invisible and spiritual reality, is reflected in the visible and material world, it becomes limited to the bounds of time and place, and insofar as it is associated with the physical bodies of the various Manifestations of God, it accepts plurality, which is a characteristic of the world of creation. In every age, it receives a new name, proclaims a new mission, reveals new laws, and establishes new teachings according to the exigencies of that time and place. The realm of God is the world of perfection, constancy, and oneness. In its connection to that world, therefore, revelation is perfect, unchanging, and one. The world of creation, however, is the world of imperfections, changes, and differences. Consequently, in its connection with the world of creation, revelation becomes subject to change and progress (Dávudí 1996: 191–192). This progress is made possible through the progressive revelation of the divine religions (Íqán 124; see Sasha Dehghani's chapter 'Progressive revelation'). 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Some Answered Questions* no. 20) states:

The change and transformation of conditions, and the succession and revolution of ages, are among the essential requirements of the contingent world, and essential requirements cannot be separated from the reality of things. . . . And since change and transformation are among the requirements of all contingent things, the commandments of God are also changed in accordance with the changing times. . . . The body of the world can be compared to that of a man, and the Prophets and Messengers of God to able physicians. A human being does not remain always in the same condition: Different ailments occur and each calls for a specific remedy. Thus an able physician does not treat all ailments in the same manner but varies the treatments and remedies in accordance with the requirements of these various ailments and conditions.

Conclusion

Bahá'ís believe in the absolute transcendence of God and that in the world of God, His names and attributes are identical with His Essence and, therefore, unknowable. Consequently, Bahá'ís negate everything other than the Essence of God in His realm. Further, the effusion of God's revelation is the cause of the existence of all created things and of the emergence of names and attributes in the world of creation. The Bahá'í teachings distinguish between the essential names and attributes of God in His world, which are unknowable, and the names and attributes that we ascribe to Him in this world in order to worship Him and praise His perfections. All mentions of God's names and attributes, as well as all descriptions of His nearness, remoteness, and presence, therefore, relate to the outpourings of His revelation in the world of creation. Every created being emanates from God and, commensurate with its station in this emanational procession, enjoys a degree of existence and reflects the names and attributes of God accordingly. Finally, while God is unknowable as He is in His realm, He can be known in the world of creation through the signs of His revelation in this world and the reflections of His names and attributes in all created things, especially in His chosen Representatives Who enjoy a greater degree of perfection and are true mirrors of all His names and attributes.

The elements of Bahá'í theology, with the concept of the Manifestation of God as their point of convergence, allow for the recognition of God while preserving His absolute transcendence. They provide unique and fresh insights into resolving several paradoxes in religious history, reconciling various theological problems that have caused differences among the followers of different religions, and settling numerous obscure questions and abstruse matters in religious

thought, such as the emanation of many from One, diversity from the Absolute Singleness, and the visible from the Invisible.

The highest form and the ultimate limit of the human comprehension of God is the knowledge of the perfect recipient of divine revelation in the world of creation—the Manifestation of God. The corollary to this principle is that the knowledge of God refers to the knowledge of His Manifestation; that the ultimate goal, the object, and the meaning of the mystic quest and the spiritual journey is the knowledge of the Manifestation of God (Saiedi 1995: 84); and that any mention of divine presence refers to the presence of the Manifestation of God (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 100; Epistle 118; see Vargha Bolodo-Taefi's chapter on 'Mysticism').

The connection of the Manifestations of God to the Holy Spirit and to the world of creation (Bahá'u'lláh, *Aqdas* para. 1) engenders the Bahá'í belief in Their unity in diversity, which sheds a new light on the problem of 'return' in religious traditions. Every Manifestation of God can be considered as the return of a previous one, and it is on this basis that Bahá'ís believe Bahá'u'lláh to be the return of Christ (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 145). Similarly, any one of the Manifestations of God can claim to be the first or the 'Seal of the Prophets' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 114), and thus the question of 'finality' is addressed. This notion also unifies the different Christian and Muslim views on the stations of Jesus Christ and Muhammad. Finally, the eschatological meeting with God at the end of days, the Day of Judgement or the Day of Resurrection, is interpreted to refer to the appearance of a new Manifestation of God at the end of a religious dispensation, when the followers of the previous religion are judged based on their recognition or rejection of the new Manifestation of God (Momen 2016).

While the term 'manifestation of God' and some conception of it have a history in Islamic thought, the centrality, authority, novelty, vision, and importance of the concept of the Manifestation of God in Bahá'í theology are unprecedented in religious history because it defines the Bahá'í belief in the reflection of God's names and attributes in the world of creation (Saiedi 1995: 84). The writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are replete with statements about this concept. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Mother Book of the Bahá'í revelation, for instance, begins with a fundamental tenet of the Bahá'í Faith that the first duty God has prescribed for His servants is the recognition of His Manifestation. The Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation of God is a core theme of the Bahá'í view on theology, cosmology, epistemology, eschatology, ethics, history, and sociology (Momen 2016; Saiedi 2000: chap. 5). It revolutionizes the terminology, conceptual framework, scope, and implications of prophethood and revelation that existed in previous traditions.

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