

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet on the Unity of Existence*

He is God!

Those pre-eminent Sufis who founded the doctrine of the “unity of existence” [*wahdat al-wujúd*] never intended by this term the universally predicated existence which is conceived by the mind. For such an existence is but an accident among others occurring in association with the realities of things.¹ That is to say, these realities are the substance [*jawhār*],² whereas that existence which is conceived by the mind, the universally predicated existence, is but an accident associated with them.

Rather, what these pre-eminent figures have alluded to is an existence compared to which the realities of all things are mere accidents. By this is intended an existence that is pre-eternal [*qadīm*] whilst all other things are contingent [*ḥādīth*]. Thus, the existence to which they refer is that ineffable Reality whereby all things are realized, or, in other words, by virtue of which all things subsist, but which itself remaineth self-subsistent above the heavens and the earth. The words “He is the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent”³ bear witness

*Provisional translation provided by the Bahá’í World Centre. Notes by Keven Brown. The Tablet is published in Persian in *Min Makātib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (From the Collected Letters of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Bahá’í Brasil, 1982) 1:274–77.

1. The meaning of the phrase *‘arīḍ bar haqqā’iq-i-mumkināt míshavad*, translated here as “occurring in association with the realities of things,” may be “occurring to the realities of things.” A parallel passage in *Mufávadát* (i.e., *Some Answered Questions*) uses the expression *hulúl bar haqqā’iq-i-ká’ínát*, which can mean “inhering in,” “occurring to,” and “descending upon.” In other words, this external existence, to which we mentally predicate the attribute of existence, is an accident subsisting through (*qá’im bī*) the realities of things (see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Mufávadát* [New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1984] 203).

2. Substance (*jawhār*) is an Aristotelian term which refers to that in which something else subsists or whereby it subsists. The substance of something is usually contrasted with its accidents (*‘arad*; pl., *a’rād*). A substance denotes the essential being of an entity. As Aristotle explains, substances “are subjects for all the other things [i.e., accidents] and all the other things are predicated of them or are in them” (*Categories* 2b.15). An example of a substance is *this* man or *this* horse, whereas the predicated accidents, according to Aristotle, consist of quantity, quality, relation, place, time, posture, possession, action, and passivity. So if we say: “Socrates is existing,” existence, in this case, is a predicated quality of the substance Socrates. The term “substance” (*jawhār*) is roughly equivalent to essence (*máḥfyya*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*), which refer to “that by which a thing is what it is,” though differences between whether the subject is universal or individual may apply.

3. Qur’án 2:255 and 3:2.

to the truth of this utterance. And since that existence whereby all things are realized is one, there is "unity of existence."⁴

The generality of the Sufis, however, conceive of that ineffable Reality as having resolved itself [*ḥulūl*] into countless forms, as hath been said:

The sea hath ever been the sea,
And all contingent things its waves and forms;
This world resembleth ice, and Thee—
Thou art the water at its very source.⁵

In other words, although that ineffable Reality defieeth all description, they found themselves obliged to describe it, and hence termed it "existence." In brief, the generality of the Sufis hold that that existence which is above all description and beyond all understanding is like unto the sea, and the realities of all things are even as its waves. Although the waves continually ebb and flow, the sea remaineth ever the same and unchanged.

But in the eyes of the people of Truth, the Bahá'ís, that unseen and unknowable Being is like unto the sun, which hath dawned above all things and from whose rays all creatures, whether mineral, plant, animal, or human, obtain illumination. That is to say, its effulgent rays shine upon them all and they, in turn, reflect faithfully its light. Thus, if thou dost gaze upon the stone, the earth, the plant, the animal, and man, thou wilt find them one and all to be partaking of the bounty of the sun. In like manner, although the realities of all created things are the recipients of the bounty of the Daystar of Truth, the latter doth not descend from its heights of holiness and sanctity, nor doth it resolve itself into contingent beings. "No thing is there but that it containeth a sign betokening His oneness."⁶

4. In a Tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "Existence is of two kinds: one is the existence of God, which is beyond the comprehension of man. . . . The second kind of existence is [that of creation. It is that common existence which is perceived by the mind (*mafhúm dhjní*) and comprehended by the intellect of man. This existence is contingent (or "created," *ḥádhith*), dependent (*muhtáj*), and is preceded by a cause. . . . In the world of existence, that is to say, in this existence which is perceived by the mind, is contingent, and hath various stages, the first degree is the mineral]. . . ." (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979] no. 30; *Muntakhabát* [Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979] vol. 1, no. 30). In another Tablet, however, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distinguishes yet a third type of existence belonging to the world of the Primal Will and to the realities of things. He explains that God's existence is identical to and indistinguishable from His Essence. Existence in the incorporeal world of the Will is neither accidental, in the manner of external existence, nor absolutely self-subsistent, in the manner of God's existence, but it occurs as a distinguishable yet inseparable concomitant of essence. Only in the temporal world can existence be extinguished and separated from the realities of things. See *Min Makátib* 1:41.

5. The first two lines of this poem are attributed to Mu'yyi'd-Dín al-Jandí (see Vahid Ra'fati, *Ma' ákhdh-i-Ash'ár dar Áthár-i-Bahá'í* [Dundas, Ont.: Persian Institute for Bahá'í Studies, 1990] 1:91), and the second two are attributed to 'Abdu'l-Karím al-Jílí (see *Universal Man: Extracts Translated with Commentary by Titus Burckhardt* [Sherborne, Glos.: Beshara Publications, 1983] 28).

6. Attributed to Abu'l-'Atáhiyah.

In sum, the generality of the mystics imagine that existence is limited to two conditions: God [*al-ḥaqq*] and creation. They believe God to be the inner reality of all things and creation to be the outward appearance thereof. The people of Truth, however, recognize three realms of existence: God, Command (which is the Primal Will), and creation. The Primal Will, which is the realm of Command, is the inner reality of all things, and all beings are therefore the manifestations of the Divine Will, not the manifestations of the Divine Essence and Reality itself. "His are the realms of Command and creation."⁷

As to the station of the Godhead, it is exalted above and sanctified beyond the understanding of all created things, how much more above resolving itself into their realities! His Holiness the Báb (may my life be a sacrifice unto Him) hath stated that the meaning of the verse "The sea hath ever been the sea, and all contingent things its waves and forms" is fulfilled in the Primal Will, not in the Divine Essence.

The generality of the Sufis venture even to imagine that ineffable Reality to be like the number "one," and all creation to constitute the repetitions thereof. Thus, "one" hath repeated itself and produced "two," hath repeated itself twice and produced "three," and so on for all numbers. Furthermore, numbers are a matter of convention: though they are fixed [*thábit*] [in the mind], they have no objective existence.

As to the "fixed archetypes" [*'ayán thábita*]⁸ spoken of by the mystics, the argument is this: Numbers, although fixed, have no definite existence and are a mere convention. As they say: "East and west, north and south, possess a fixed character, yet they have no objective existence. Likewise, the fixed archetypes are the forms of God's knowledge: they have a fixed character, but have not inhaled even a breath of real existence." God forbid that it should be so! Were such conceptions to be held, the Eternal would become the contingent, and the contingent the Eternal, and the universal Reality would be compelled to descend and resolve itself into infinite forms in the realities of all things.⁹ Whereas ascent and descent, egress and regress, dissolution and decline, composition and commingling are among the characteristics of material bodies. Even incorporeal things are freed and sanctified above such imaginings, how much more then that universal Reality! The aforementioned attributes are indeed those of corporeal, not of incorporeal things.

7. Qur'án 7:54.

8. *Thábit* has been translated here as "fixed," but this term also has the technical meaning of "posited," which conveys the sense that the archetypes (*'ayán*) refer to the essences of things in themselves and not as something concretely existent. They have mental being, insofar as they are established or posited in the divine knowledge, but they do not have concrete being, since they are not actualized existents.

9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá consistently refutes the idea that the fixed archetypes are present in the essential knowledge of God (as opposed to His created knowledge, which is the Primal Will). For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as for *Shaykh* Ahmad and the Báb, this is incorrect since at the level of God's Essence His knowledge does not depend on objects of knowledge.

In brief, the pre-eminent Sufis mean by "existence" that through which all things are realized, and which is one, unknown in its attributes, unseen, inaccessible, and severed from all human understanding. But even then, they believe in two stations: God and creation; and they further claim that God Himself hath two stations: that of sanctity and transcendence [*tanzíh*] ("Nothing is like unto Him"¹⁰), and that of similarity and resemblance [*tashbíh*] ("He is the Hearing, the Knowing"¹¹). Thus Rumi saith:

O Traceless One of myriad ways!
Those who confound Thy signs with Thee
And those who espouse Thy unity
Thou dost alike amaze.

Thou dost one day the former make
To recognize Thy oneness, while
On another, with amazement, Thou
The latter's heart dost shake.

Yet in Thine Essence Thou art not
Alike to this or that; to each
Thou standest far beyond the reach
Of mortal mind and thought.

Thus Hasan's father in his rapture
Of Thy contemplation born
Doth call to Thee: "O young of years!
O delicate of form!"¹²

His meaning, in brief, is this: Thou hast two manifestations [*tajallí*]: one that entaileth an intermediary, and one that admitteth of none. When, unintermediated by Thy mirrors, Thou revealest Thyself unto one who is wont to compare Thee to Thy creation, Thou makest him a believer in Thy transcendent unity. And when Thou revealest Thyself, through the intermediary of Thy mirrors, unto a believer in Thy unity, Thou inclinest him to comparison, in such wise that he addresseth Thee saying: "O young of years! O delicate of form!"

The truth, however, is that the reality of that sanctified Essence can in no wise descend into the realm of creation. For Him there is no egress or regress, no descent or dissolution, no composition or commingling; only infinite transcendence. He is even as the sun whose rays shine upon all earthly beings. All things are invigorated and made visible by Him, and reflect His light, whilst

10. Qur'án 42:11.

11. See, for example, Qur'án 5:76, 26:220, and 44:6.

12. *Mathnáví* 2:55, 57-59.

He remaineth, in the heights of holiness, exalted above and sanctified beyond all conditions, determinations, and distinctions, even beyond the very comprehension of His creatures. Rather is it the Primal Will, which consisteth of the radiance and bounties of that Sun, that causeth the manifestation, appearance, and visibility of all beings. "This is the truth, and naught lieth beyond the truth but error."¹³ The Glory of Glories rest upon thee.

'ABDU'L-BAHÁ
27 OCTOBER 1919

13. Cf. Qur'án 10:32.