

A Discourse on Bahá'í Theology: A Treatise by Dr. 'Alí-Murád Dávúdí on God and Revelation¹

Translation and annotation by
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INTRODUCTION

Since the early days of the Bahá'í Faith, Iran has produced notable Bahá'í scholars, such as Áqá Muḥammad-i-Qá'iní, surnamed Nabil-i-Akbar, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl-i-Gulpáygání, surnamed Abu'l-Faḍá'il,² Mírzá Asadu'lláh Fáḍil-i-Mázindarání,³ and 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí.⁴ The majority of these

scholars were educated in Islamic seminaries and trained in Islamic theology, Islamic law and jurisprudence, Arabic grammar, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic scholastic logic, away from the influence of modern thought, Western philosophy, non-classical logic, and the more refined branches of knowledge, such as literature and arts. Owing to this educational background and the requirements of the age they lived in, the fruits of their Bahá'í scholarship are invaluable compilations of the Bahá'í Writings, dictionaries, commentaries, apologetic works, and historical studies.

In 1922, at a time and in an environment in which the approach to Bahá'í scholarship was heavily influenced by seminary culture, the distinguished scholar and researcher Dr. 'Alí-Murád Dávúdí was born. A prolific author and illustrious personage, Dávúdí was well loved by the contemporary Bahá'í community of Iran. He was abducted and martyred in 1979. Dávúdí was learned in Persian and Arabic literature, achieved a complete mastery of French, and was eminently well-versed in different branches of knowledge and approaches to study and research—especially in the academic study of Islamic, Eastern, and Western philosophies, Islamic, formal, and non-classical logic, scholastic theology, and mysticism (Dávúdí, *Insán* 32, 38–40; Dávúdí, “Hamsaram” 25). His knowledge of all the disciplines of philosophy, as well as his academic approach to the study of the Bahá'í Writings, allowed him to advance Bahá'í scholarship

1 I would like to thank Elham Afnan, Monica Bolodo-Taefi, Omid Ghaemmaghami, and Todd Smith for their encouragement and valuable advice.

2 The author of weighty volumes such as *Fará'id*, *Faṣlu'l-Khiṭáb*, and *Burhán-i-Lámi'*, among several others.

3 The author and compiler of such reference material as the nine volumes of *Tárikh-i-Zuhúru'l-Haqq*, the five volumes of *Asráru'l-Áthár*, and the four volumes of *Amr va Khalq*.

4 The author of such celebrated volumes as *Ayyám-i-Tis'ih*, *Muḥáḍarát*, *Qámús-i-Íqán*, and *Rahiq-i-Makhtúm*.

beyond apologia, lexical commentary, and historical studies to new heights of conceptual and philosophical analysis of Bahá'í themes and teachings. The legacy he has bequeathed for posterity is his skillful analysis of the philosophical, theological, and ethical tenets of the Bahá'í Faith in light of the philosophical thinking of both the East and the West. Dr. Dávúdí's profundity of erudition, knowledge of the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, academic rigor in his studies, stalwart defense of the Faith, steadfastness in the Covenant, contribution to the development of the Iranian population, and nobility of character, earn him a unique place in the history of Bahá'í scholarship in the Persian language.

Dávúdí was the very first individual in Iranian history to earn a doctorate degree in philosophy after the program was instituted in the 1950s (Dávúdí, "Hamsaram" 25). In 1964, he joined the faculty of Tehran University and taught courses in introduction to philosophy, history of medieval philosophy, and metaphysics (Dávúdí, *Ulúhiyyat* 8). He later served as the head of the Department of Philosophy at Tehran University. While teaching there, he published a Persian translation of Aristotle's *On the Soul*,⁵ the first two volumes of Émile Bréhier's *Histoire de la philosophie* on ancient and medieval philosophy,⁶ as well as

Léon Meynard's *La Connaissance*,⁷ and authored a volume on the works of the philosophers of the Peripatetic school, from Aristotle to Avicenna, on soul and reason.⁸ A collection of his essays dealing with such diverse subjects as the concept of soul in Al-Fárábí's thought, a comparative study of the philosophies of Aristotle and Avicenna, ancient Greek theories of spirit and psyche, the sophists, knowledge of self, metaphysical anxiety, and a critique of infinite regress arguments, was also published in Iran under the title *Maqálát-i-Dávúdí*.⁹

Prior to his abduction in 1979, he had completed the translation into Persian of Étienne Gilson's *L'esprit de la Philosophie Médiévale*.¹⁰ This masterfully eloquent translation, which was eventually published eight years after Dávúdí's disappearance, won the highest national best-book award (Dávúdí, "Hamsaram" 26–28). In a society in which a person's avowed belief in the Bahá'í Faith came at the price of his or her basic human rights, the bestowal of such a recognition to an individual who was well known for being a Bahá'í and had been persecuted for his belief is an undeniable testament to the caliber of his work. He is recognized as a first-class philosopher of his age and among

7 *Shinásá'í va Hastí*. Dihkhudá, 1351 S.H. (1972–73).

8 '*Aql dar Hikmat-i-Mashshá'*: *Az Arastú tá Ibn-i-Siná*. Dihkhudá, 1349 S.H. (1971).

9 *Khárazmí*, 1389 S.H. (1389–90).

10 *Rúh-i-Falsafiy-i-Qurún-i-Vustá*. Tehran University, 1366 S.H. (1987–88).

5 *Darbáriy-i-Nafs*. Tehran University, 1349 S.H. (1970–71).

6 *Tárikh-i-Falsafih*. Tehran University, 1352 S.H. (1973–74).

a small number of intellectuals in Iran with training in both traditional and modern philosophy (Nasr 325). Many later Iranian philosophers were influenced by his thoughts and works.

Dávudí served on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran from 1974 until his abduction in November 1979, including as its secretary for a number of years (Dávudí, *Insán* 33). Through his service on the Bahá'í national committee for literature review, the national publication board, and the national committee for research and publication, he was instrumental in the publication of the multiple volumes of such notable collections of Bahá'í Writings as *Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá* and *Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* (collections of Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, respectively), as well as the scholarly series *Muṭáli'iy-i-Ma'árif-i-Bahá'í* that introduced the tenets of the Bahá'í Faith.

Dávudí's paramount service to the Faith—which greatly impacted the Iranian Bahá'í community, especially its youth—was his numerous scholarly lectures on the Bahá'í teachings and writings, in deepening seminars and summer schools. His contribution to fostering a culture of Bahá'í scholarship in Iran reached its peak with the establishment of the Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies in 1976. The National Spiritual Assembly of Iran created this institute in fulfillment of a goal of the Five Year Plan (1974–9)¹¹

to train a number of capable Bahá'í youth in the research and study of the Bahá'í teachings, as well as traditional religious and philosophical themes (Dávudí, *Insán* 35). The Assembly entrusted the Institute's formation, planning, supervision, and administration to 'Alí-Murád Dávudí and Badí'u'lláh Faríd. In this institute, besides his other responsibilities, Dávudí taught various themes and works of philosophy and mysticism. Thanks to Dávudí's scholarship and academic standing, as well as his tireless and systematic efforts, and particularly through the establishment of the Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies, the field of Bahá'í studies reached a new milestone of scholarly development and academic rigor.

Dávudí wrote numerous essays on the philosophical and theological underpinnings of the Bahá'í teachings, as well as on Bahá'í ethics. Some of these essays, which address such themes as the station of the human being, the human soul, non-involvement in politics, free will, the harmony of science and religion, the unity of humankind, Bahá'í education, religious truth, Bahá'í discourse, history, knowledge of God, and the concept of

Effendi devised a series of global plans of varying durations which derive their mandate from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. The aim of these plans—and of the subsequent ones, devised and guided by the Universal House of Justice since its establishment in 1963—is to develop the capacity of the Bahá'ís and their communities and institutions to strive for the betterment of humanity.

11 Beginning in 1937, Shoghi

Manifestation, have been published by Vahid Rafati in the volumes *Insán dar Á'in-i-Bahá'í* (1987), *Maqálát va Rasá'il dar Mabáhiṭh-i-Mutanavvi'ih* (1993), *Ulúhiyyat va Mazhariyyat* (1996), and *Malakút-i-Vujúd* (1998). Among them, *Insán dar Á'in-i-Bahá'í* has been translated into English by Riaz Masrouf as *Human Station in the Bahá'í Faith* (2013).

Dávudí also delivered countless lectures on various themes and writings, the audio recordings of many of which have been preserved for posterity. The topics of these lectures include the existence of God, the human soul, religion, the Word of God, unity in diversity, wisdom, materialism, freedom, the Holy Spirit, ethics, prayer, the Tablet of Aḥmad, the Tablet of the World (the Lawḥ-i-Dunyá), the Tablet to Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh, and the Tablet to Auguste Forel.

Through his service on the Institute for Advanced Bahá'í Studies, as well as his numerous lectures and essays on Bahá'í themes, Dávudí made an unparalleled contribution to the development of Bahá'í scholarship, thought, and culture in Iran and raised a generation of future Bahá'í scholars.

In addition to his erudition, Dávudí is undoubtedly remembered for his consummate power of expression and exemplary mastery of utterance by which he unfolded the meaning of abstruse concepts and obscure questions with inimitable simplicity and eloquence (Dávudí, *Ulúhiyyat* 13). His writings, translations, and audiotaped lectures attest to the graceful flow of his thought

and logic, the clarity of his utterance, and the conciseness, rigor, and dignity of his expression. He elucidated concepts, adduced proofs, and unveiled meanings free from any superfluity, exaggeration, ambiguity, and prejudice. He was often only informed of the topic of his lecture once he arrived at the recording session organized by the audio-visual committee of the National Spiritual Assembly. Occasionally, after a topic was decided in advance, he would arrive at the recording studio only to be advised of a change of topic. That he delivered many of his lectures extemporaneously, without any notes or prior knowledge of the topic, yet with exceptional quality of exposition, eloquence, flow of thought, and choice of words, made his presentation of the subjects all the more awe-inspiring (Dávudí, *Ulúhiyyat* 14).

His outstanding qualities, which also evidently characterized his writings and speeches, were his humility, dignity, and fairness. He was a gentle, elegant, modest, demure, unobtrusive, accommodating, humane, benevolent, responsible, dedicated, graceful, unassuming, pleasant, eloquent, and courteous soul (Dávudí, *Insán* 43, 45; *Ulúhiyyat* 9). He truly exemplified this passage from Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Wisdom:

Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are

detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. (*Tablets* 143)

Dávúdí dedicated his entire life to the service of the Bahá'í Faith. His education, scholarship, knowledge of the Faith, experience, and insight culminated in his defense of the Faith, its teachings, and its followers, as well as in consoling and inspiring the persecuted Bahá'í community of Iran, in a most critical and perilous period in the development of the Faith in that country (Dávúdí, *Insán* 33, 47).

Owing to the dominant prejudice against the followers of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh in Iran, their contributions to the development of thought and scholarship in all fields of knowledge have been almost completely left out of all historical accounts. Dávúdí's contribution to the development of philosophy in Iran is no exception to this rule (Dávúdí, *Ulúhiyyat* 9–10; Dávúdí, “Hamsaram” 26–28). It is worth remembering that he produced almost all his Bahá'í works, essays, and lectures in the midst of the violent prelude to the Islamic revolution in Iran, while he was serving as the secretary of the National Spiritual Assembly and occupied with the imperatives of the circumstances. That many of the fruits of Dávúdí's intellectual activities were produced in a turbulent period of intense clamor, unrest, and toil—in the absence of the peace and tranquility requisite for the flourishing of

philosophical and mystical thought—is especially poignant.

Alas, the beleaguered and oppressed community of the Bahá'ís of Iran was robbed of its stalwart and erudite defender in such a grave period in its evolution. The opponents of the Faith who vainly saw in his elimination a great victory for themselves and an irreparable defeat for the Bahá'í community, kidnapped him on 11 November 1979 as he walked in a park near his house. He has been presumed a victim of state execution (Dávúdí, *Insán* 48; Dávúdí, “Hamsaram” 22). Aged fifty-seven at the time of his martyrdom, he was only at the beginning of his path of philosophy and in the springtime of his life of scholarship. His execution was a deplorable injustice and grievous cruelty towards the world of philosophy and scholarship.

Five months later, at Riḍván 1980, when the Iranian Bahá'í community elected its National Spiritual Assembly, Dr. ‘Alí-Murád Dávúdí was elected again—in absentia. A grateful community thus expressed its love and appreciation to a hero (Dávúdí, *Insán* 49).

What follows is a translation and annotation of a treatise on Bahá'í theology by Dr. ‘Alí-Murád Dávúdí. This treatise explores some central themes in Bahá'í theology and introduces eloquently such fundamental concepts as the absolute transcendence of God, apophatic theology, the knowledge of God, the revelation of God, emanation and manifestation, and the divine names and attributes. Aside from the

Bahá'í authoritative Writings, a single document that exclusively introduces the Bahá'í view on God has been hitherto absent from the English Bahá'í literature and it is hoped that this collection will contribute to a discourse on divinity. In this work, Dávudí liberally cites passages from the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith to elaborate each theme. As a result, the following translation features heretofore unpublished provisional translations of over fifty passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as well as from the utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Since the inception of the Bahá'í Faith, including during Bahá'u'lláh's own lifetime, Bahá'ís have occasionally held different understandings of the station of Bahá'u'lláh, with some considering His human Temple to be the appearance of the invisible and inaccessible Essence of God. An aspect of the systematic persecution to which the Bahá'í community was subjected in Iran, particularly during Dávudí's lifetime, was an assault levelled against its teachings about God and the station of Bahá'u'lláh. Bahá'ís were often accused of denying God or believing Bahá'u'lláh to be God. Dávudí's commentaries on the foundations of Bahá'í theology in this treatise and in others about the concept and the station of the Manifestation of God were, and remain, invaluable contributions toward resolving such instances of misconception and campaigns of disinformation. In his other essays about the Bahá'í concept of Manifestation, Dávudí demonstrates how this concept resolves

historical paradoxes between scriptural promise of attaining the presence of God and His transcendence and inaccessibility, and between His universal revelation in all created things and His essential separation from them.

In addition to the exemplary works of the Bahá'í scholars named earlier, there is a wealth of outstanding literature of excellent academic rigor in Persian by numerous Bahá'í scholars of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, such as 'Azízu'lláh Mişbáh, Muḥammad-Báqir Húshyár, Khusraw Muhandisí, Kamálu'd-Dín Bakhtávar, Muḥammad Afnán, Shapour Rassekh, Vahid Rafati, Nader Saiedi, and Farídu'd-Dín Rádmíhr, among many others. Once translated into English, these works will no doubt enrich the intellectual life of the entire Bahá'í world and contribute to public discourse in various disciplines. Their translation will also unlock the possibility of greater and richer exchange between Persian and non-Persian Bahá'í scholarship, allowing the finest contributions of both to be brought into fruitful dialogue.

The original-language treatise translated and annotated here was first published as "Mabání-y-i-'Aqá'id-i-Ulúhíyyat va Tawhíd: part 1," in *Muṭá-li'iy-i-Ma'árif-i-Bahá'í* 1 (1973–74). It was later republished as part of a collection of Dávudí's essays on the Essence of God and His Manifestation, titled *Ulúhíyyat va Mazharíyyat* (60–133). The translation of Dávudí's treatise is in the body of the text; the translator's annotation appears in the in-text citation and footnotes.

GOD'S SANCTITY
AND TRANSCENDENCE

Bahá'ís believe in a God that has ever been, and will always be, inaccessible and exalted above creation. He does not descend into any world which is created by Him and which is, therefore, not of His kind. We, likewise, hold that the followers of other religions, if they confess the reality of their own religions, should also recognize God in this manner;¹² otherwise, they would err and stray from the straight path.¹³ And since God is beyond descent and habitation, return and ascent are, equally, unworthy of Him and incompatible

12 For formulations of the concept of God's inaccessibility and exaltation in other religions, see Aquinas 30; Saint Augustine, book I, chs. 1 and 4, book VII, ch. 1; Qur'án 42:11, 37:180, and 112:1-4; Al-Kindí's "On First Philosophy" ("Kitábu Al-Kindí ila'l-Mu'taşim-i-bi'lláh") 1:4, published in Abú-Rídah 160-161; Avicenna 40-66; *Al-Futúhátu'l-Makkíyyih*, vol. 1, ch. 3, pp. 144-153 and vol. 3, ch. 172, pp. 434-439; *Fuṣúṣu'l-Hikam* 48-56.

13 It is to this same principle—the oneness of the underlying foundations of the divine religions—that the following excerpts from the Tablet of Aḥmad refer: "O people, if ye deny these verses, by what proof have ye believed in God? Produce it, O assemblage of false ones. ... Be thou assured in thyself that verily, he who turns away from this Beauty hath also turned away from the Messengers of the past and showeth pride towards God from all eternity to all eternity" (Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers* 211-12).

with His station.¹⁴ He does not become incarnate in anything.¹⁵ No relationship or tie of direct intercourse binds Him to His creation.¹⁶ Any mention of separation and union, or proximity and remoteness in relation to God is merely figurative. No one can choose a path towards Him as no sign can indicate the direction of His presence or guide His creation to Him. His presence is free from all notions of time and space. For this reason, where God is intended, "seat," "throne," or "court"—in fact all description—should indeed be avoided;¹⁷ yet speech is unavoidable. It is,

14 See *Gleanings* no. 19; The Seven Valleys; *Some Answered Questions* nos. 27, 37, 54, 59, and 82.

15 Having interpreted the figurative language of verses such as John 1:14, John 14:10, John 1:1, 1 John 4:2, and 1 Timothy 3:16 literally, Christian theologians declared "incarnation"—the belief that God became flesh, assumed a human nature, and became a man in the form of Jesus Christ, the Son of God—to be a doctrine of the Church. Mainstream Judaism, as well as Islamic philosophy, scholastic theology, and mysticism completely reject incarnation.

16 See *Gleanings* nos. 26 and 27.

17 The Throne of God is a common concept in many Abrahamic religions. Many understand the references to the Throne of God in Judaism (for example 1 Kings 22:19, Isaiah 6:1, Ezekiel 1:26, and Daniel 7:9), Christianity (such as Matthew 23:22 and Revelation 4), Islam (for example Qur'án 10:3, 11:7, 23:116, and 2:255, known as the *Áyatu'l-Kursi*), and the Bahá'í Faith (such as the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* pars. 40, 73, 86, and 89, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*,

therefore, out of this consideration that His Chosen Ones speak of “the Seat of eternal holiness,” “the Habitation of glory,” or “the Throne of majesty” with reference to God. His Essence, however, is eternally unseen and forever concealed within His own Being. To liken Him to anything or view anything as being of His kind is unbecoming.

We must, inevitably, recognize God as a necessary, simple,¹⁸ single, nondelimited,¹⁹ and incorporeal Being; otherwise, there would be no difference between Him and all other created things—which are contingent, compounded, many, delimited, and corporeal—just as we would have no need to accept Him or believe in His existence. In order to confess His simple reality, therefore, we must recognize that no constituent elements have come together within Him.²⁰ To declare His

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, and many Bahá'í prayers) to be allegorical rather than describing a physical dwelling-place of God.

18 Throughout history, major religions have often confessed divine simplicity in apophatic theological terms—seeking to understand God by negation, by what He is not, while sanctifying Him from all names and attributes.

19 In *Al-Futúhátu'l-Makkíyyih*, vol. 4, ch. 272, pp. 313–315, describing God's nondelimitation, Ibnu'l 'Arabí explains that God is infinite and absolute, undefined and indefinable, indistinct and indistinguishable, whereas the world of creation is distinct, defined, and limited.

20 Bahá'u'lláh's commentary on the Islamic philosophical doctrine of “The un-compounded reality is all things”

singleness, we must reject any notion of plurality in relation to God.²¹ In order to recognize Him as nondelimited, we must abnegate completely all forms of association or relationship with Him. Otherwise, we will be deposing God from His divinity and confusing what we term God with other than Him.

To recognize God as such and to exalt Him above ascent and descent, habitation and indwelling, separation and union, relationship, direction and intimation, and time and space, is the foundation of Bahá'í theology. The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are replete with references to this theme, using a wide range of expressions such as “veiled in the ancient eternity of His own exalted and indivisible Essence” (*Gleanings* 148:1), “concealed in His inaccessible majesty and glory” (148:1), “dwelt in His inaccessible habitation of holiness and glory” (124:1), and “enthroned upon the heights of His independent sovereignty and grandeur” (124:1). The extent to which this reality is reiterated and stressed in the Bahá'í

(*Basítu'l-ḥaqíqah kullu'l-ashyá'*), known as the *Lawḥ-i-Basítatu'l-Ḥaqíqih*, is published in the original language in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:140–147. The formulation of this doctrine, founded on the Neoplatonic concept of “the One”—that God, the One, is a simple and pure Being and, as such, is the totality of existence—is attributed to Mullá Ṣadrá.

21 For example, some traditions concerning deities in Hinduism, Elohim in Judaism, and trinity in Christianity, among others, attribute some form of multiplicity to God.

Writings makes it the fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief. To understand this truth is the greatest duty prescribed for Bahá'ís and to confess it in heart and mind is the first requirement when declaring one's faith in Bahá'u'lláh.

The following passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are representative of myriad others on this theme. Their study must follow a holistic approach which seeks to consider them within their context and as part of a balanced and cohesive whole, with due regard to the links that unite them. May this enable us to discover their inner meaning as thoroughly as human capacity and limits allow.

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* 19:1)

No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness. No sign can indicate His presence or His absence; inasmuch as by a word of His command all that are in heaven and on earth have come to exist, and by His wish, which is the Primal Will itself, all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the realm of being, the world of the visible. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70)

No tie of direct intercourse can ever bind Him to the things He hath created, nor can the most abstruse and most remote allusions of His creatures do justice to His being. (*Gleanings* 148:1)

. . . the one true God, alone and single, is established upon His Throne, a Throne which is beyond the reaches of time and space, is sanctified above all utterance or expression, intimation, description and definition, and is exalted beyond all notion of abasement and glory. And none knoweth this save Him and those with whom is the knowledge of the Book. No God is there but Him, the Almighty, the All-Bountiful. (*Summons* 167)

Alone and singly is He exalted upon His Throne, a Throne which transcendeth all conditions of time and space, expression and intimation, indication and description, loftiness and lowliness. And none knoweth this save every man of intelligence and insight. (Lawh-i-Sarráj, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:81, provisional translation)

From time immemorial . . . He, the Divine Being, hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlasting continue to be wrapt in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence . . . (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi 113)

. . . let none construe these utterances to imply the incarnation or descent of the worlds of God into the grades of His creatures, nor should they lead thine eminence to such misapprehensions. For God, in His Essence, is sanctified above all ascent and descent, egress and regress (*Call* 2:45)

Know thou that God—exalted and glorified be He—doth in no wise manifest His inmost Essence and Reality. From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the eternity of His Essence and concealed in the infinitude of His own Being. (*Gems* ¶ 46)

The One True God, exalted be His glory, is bound unto none by the least tie of relationship or association, of similarity or resemblance . . . (Lawḥ-i-Sarráj, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:7, provisional translation)

Sanctified is His unknowable Essence from every incorporeal essence . . . (Tablet to Mullá Hámid, in *Hadíqiy-i-'Irfán* 110, provisional translation)

From everlasting, O my God, Thou hast been exalted in the loftiest heights of Thy dominion, Thy might, and Thy glory, and unto all eternity Thou wilt remain transcendent in the sublimity of Thy majesty, Thy grandeur, and Thy splendor. (Iranian National

Bahá'í Archives 71:31, provisional translation)

From eternity, the one true God, glorified be His mention, hath been and will continue to be sanctified from all manifestation and revelation. He is the unseen Essence never to be fathomed, the veiled Entity never to be perceived, the inmost Reality never to be made manifest, the hidden Treasure never to be revealed, and the invisible Mystery never to be laid bare . . . (*Áthár* 6:29, provisional translation)

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, is He above being cast into any element, being restricted by any limitation, or being associated with anything in the entire creation. He hath from all eternity been immensely exalted beyond all else but Himself and sanctified from all save His own Self. (Lawḥ-i-Basítatu'l-Ḥaqqíqih, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:142, provisional translation)

In this essay, we intend to cite evidence primarily from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and to quote from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá for further elucidation. It will, however, suffice to cite herein but one sample passage from the Writings of the Báb in support of this theme. Nearly all of the Writings of the Báb are replete with similar passages: “the substance and essence of the subject is this, that there can be

no doubt that from everlasting God hath been invested with the independent sovereignty of His exalted Being, and unto everlasting He will remain inaccessible in the transcendent majesty of His holy Essence” (§4:10).

Below are two passages from the Writings and utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that elucidate and explain the above excerpts from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh: “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* 27:2).

Also:

The Divine Reality is Unthinkable, Limitless, Eternal, Immortal and Invisible. The world of creation is bound by natural law, finite and mortal. The Infinite Reality cannot be said to ascend or descend. It is beyond the understanding of man, and cannot be described in terms which apply to the phenomenal sphere of the created world. ... Riches and poverty, plenty and need: ... there could be no relation between these pairs of opposites. (*Paris Talks* 17:1–5)

The above arguments of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the Interpreter of the Word of God, are at once the direct implication and explanation of a subject intimated

briefly yet frequently in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that God is pre-existent while the world of creation is originated; God is the Creator, the world is created; God is omnipotent, the world of creation is the essence of powerlessness. There is a fundamental variance and extreme distinction between God and the world. How can the creation, from its plane of origination, poverty, and powerlessness, imperfect as it is, hope to find a path to God, associate with Him, or seek nearness to Him? Therefore, where the Prophets, the sages, and the mystics speak of drawing near to God, finding a path towards Him, and turning to Him, one must search for their inner meanings and perceive their true purpose. The section “Proximity and Remoteness” in this essay explores this concept further.

NEGATING GOD’S NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES

We believe that no attributes can be ascribed to God, He cannot be called by any names, nor can He be regarded as possessing any perfections. Therefore, we cannot sing His praise with any attributes, names, or perfections.

Bahá’u’lláh states: “I testify that Thou hast been sanctified above all attributes and holy above all names. No God is there but Thee, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 92). He also writes: “no description can ever express Him and no word of praise magnify His glory” (*Tablets* 113). He further states: “Glorified be

the Merciful One, unto Whom no allusion can be made, Whom no expression can define, nor any assertion reveal, nor any evidence describe” (*Tablets* 102). He also writes: “Far is the realm of names from the court of His presence to which praise itself is ashamed to claim any relation and sanctification itself is abashed to allude. Exalted, immeasurably exalted, is He above every mention and every description” (Tablet to Jináb-i-Varqá, in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 19:262, provisional translation).

In interpreting these passages, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “the reality of the Ancient Being, in the sense that It is that It is, is sanctified from any acclamation or praise and exalted above any glorification and definition, any description and explanation” (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 1:134, provisional translation). He also writes: “no title can be mentioned for Him and enlightened souls can give Him no praise” (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 1:188, provisional translation). He further states: “The One True God is entirely beyond the reach of the mind and above all conception, for He is sanctified from all attributes and exalted above all praise. No name [can adequately describe Him], neither [can] any sign [lead to His knowledge]” (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 2:141, provisional translation).

Why can we ascribe no attributes to God? Because each attribute indicates a specific, limited, and distinct meaning. God’s embodiment of any of these attributes would require His reality to be limited to the confines of

the specific meaning of each attribute, which is tantamount to limitation in His Essence. Likewise, these attributes are many. Were God to embody each of them from its specific aspect or perspective, it would either necessitate that He be divided into various aspects, perspectives, and relations, which would be tantamount to His being plural, leaving us unable to confess His singleness; or require Him to be in need of component parts, a need that would negate His All-Possessing and Self-Sufficient attributes.

In denying all division in God, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “That reality admits of no division, for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things, and not accidents impinging upon the Necessary Being” (*Some Answered Questions* 27:1).

It quickly becomes evident that ascribing attributes to God and, by extension, calling Him by names signify only one reality: that He has no attributes or, in other words, His attributes are identical with His Essence. Otherwise, there would be a multiplicity of pre-existences, according to the philosophical terminology reiterated in the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.²² That is to say, we would have to, of necessity, consider all the attributes we ascribe to God outside of His Essence as pre-existent and parallel to His Essence, and thereby commit blasphemy. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s elucidation, “the

22 See, for example, Mullá Şadrá 132.

essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is sanctified above all understanding. If the essential attributes were not identical with the Essence, then there would be a multiplicity of pre-existences and the distinction between the Essence and the attributes would therefore also be firmly established and pre-existent. But this would imply an infinite chain of pre-existences, which is an evident error” (*Some Answered Questions* 37:7). A more detailed discussion of this theme is available in other Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, such as His commentary on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure.”²³

Therefore, to preserve Divine unity, we must confess the oneness of God’s attributes and consider them as identical with His Essence. This requires us to negate everything that is other than His Essence. Were we even to ascribe affirmative attributes to God, this must convey negating some attributes from His Essence—the very attributes we see in His creation and which indicate the imperfection of the world of creation compared with the world of God. For instance, if we say that God is all-knowing and all-powerful, this must denote that we are negating the attributes of ignorance and weakness from His Essence, and not that we are ascribing to Him knowledge and power in an affirmative sense, as things that can be accepted and possessed, thereby

denying His oneness.

Bahá’u’lláh states: “He hath through all eternity been exalted beyond the attributes of His creation” (*Call* 2:45) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clarifies this concept in the following words:

Yet we 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.

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 . . . (*Some Answered Questions* 37:6–7)

Moreover, since names and attributes are created by God and brought about through His command, they are unworthy of His station. In other words, since the Essence of God is the one and only Creator, if His names and attributes are other than His Essence, they are inevitably His creation. How can creation occupy the same station

23 A provisional translation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s commentary on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure...” is available in Momen.

as the Creator, be ascribed to Him, or accompany Him? We have no recourse but to distance the attributes from the Creator and to keep them at the level of His creation.

Bahá'u'lláh writes: "Every name hath been raised up by His word and every attribute hath been revealed through His command, did ye but know" (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 38:224, provisional translation). He also states:

Praise beseems the Beloved, He Who from time immemorial hath been sanctified from the glorification of all created things and throughout eternity will be exalted above the praise of all beings. For the praise and glorification of all that are in heaven and on earth have been created and fashioned by His behest. How can a thing that hath been created at His bidding be worthy of His excellence and attain unto His highness? All else besides Him are unworthy of Him and all else save Him are unfit before Him. (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 41:282–83, provisional translation)

He further writes:

I cannot think, O my God, of any words wherewith to make mention of Thee, and know not how to express or extol Thee. Were I to attempt to describe Thee by Thy names, I would readily recognize that the kingdom of these names

is itself created through the movement of Thy fingers, and trembleth for fear of Thee. And were I to venture to extol Thine attributes, I would be forced to admit that these attributes are Thine own creation, and lie within Thy grasp. It behooveth not Them Who are the Manifestations of these names and attributes to stand before the gate of the city of Thy Revelation, how much less to scale the heights whereon Thou didst stablish the throne of Thy majesty.

I swear by Thy might, O Thou Who art the King of names and the Maker of the heavens! Whatsoever hath been adorned with the robe of words is but Thy creation which hath been generated in Thy realm and begotten through the operation of Thy will, and is wholly unworthy of Thy highness and falleth short of Thine excellence. (*Prayers* no. 176)

According to the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith, the world of existence has no beginning and no end. That is to say, since a creator without a creation is inconceivable, there cannot have been a time when God existed without a creation. Were it to be suggested that God brought the world into existence from non-existence,²⁴ it must

24 The assertion that God created the world out of nothing, or *creatio ex nihilo*, can be found in some Jewish scholarship, early Christian thought, and some Islamic commentaries. For example, refer to Maimonides ch. LXXIV.

be clarified that by non-existence is not meant absolute non-existence, but relative non-existence. We do not intend to discuss this theme or prove its truth here as it is outside the scope of the subject before us.²⁵ What is relevant in this theme, however, is the Islamic tradition, “God was alone; there was none else besides Him” (Al-Bukhárí no. 3191). In interpreting this *hadíth*, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the negation of all things from God is not bound by the limits of time. In other words, God was, is, and will forever be alone, with none else besides Him. Nothing whatsoever, no name or attribute, compares with His Essence. He was, is, and will be alone, without any names, attributes, and matters besides Him that are other than and outside His Essence. In summary, we must negate all names, praises, and descriptions—all that is created—from God.

Bahá'u'lláh states: “We testify that there is none other God but Him, that from everlasting He was alone with none else besides Him, and that He shall be unto everlasting what He hath ever been” (*Summons* 152–53). He also writes:

Know assuredly that God's creation hath existed from eternity, and will continue to exist forever. Its beginning hath had no beginning, and its end knoweth no end. His name, the Creator,

presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must involve the existence of a servant.

As to those sayings, attributed to the Prophets of old, such as, “In the beginning was God; there was no creature to know Him,” and “The Lord was alone; with no one to adore Him,” the meaning of these and similar sayings is clear and evident, and should at no time be misapprehended. To this same truth bear witness these words which He hath revealed: “God was alone; there was none else besides Him. He will always remain what He hath ever been.” Every discerning eye will readily perceive that the Lord is now manifest, yet there is none to recognize His glory. By this is meant that the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of anyone besides Him. Whatsoever in the contingent world can either be expressed or apprehended, can never transgress the limits which, by its inherent nature, have been imposed upon it. God, alone, transcendeth such limitations. He, verily, is from everlasting. No peer or partner has been, or can ever be, joined with Him. No name can be compared with His Name. No pen can portray His nature, neither can any tongue depict His glory. He will, forever, remain immeasurably exalted above anyone except Himself. (*Gleanings* 78:1–2)

²⁵ For a discussion of the Bahá'í belief regarding this theme, refer to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* nos. 47, 80.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives an example to elucidate this truth, acknowledging that examples are inappropriate in relation to the station of God, because “that Essence of supreme singleness can in no wise be likened to anything, for It is beyond the reach of all reasoning and comprehension and too great to be likened or compared to anything” (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 2:7, provisional translation). Yet metaphor and allegory are unavoidable for human beings who aspire to investigate the mysteries of the Divine reality on this earthly plane:

For instance, consider the “point” and how within the essence and reality of the “point” letters and words are wrapped up and inherent with utter nothingness and evanescence in such wise that no trace of existence can possibly be found in letters and words, nor is there any distinction between them and the “point.” Rather they are wholly effaced and utterly evanescent and have no existence save in the essence of the “point.” In like manner, the names and attributes of God and the evidences of His Essence are wholly evanescent and utterly non-existent before the realm of His supreme singleness in such wise that they enjoy neither a material nor a mental existence. This original “point” is the hidden treasure of these letters and words. Within it are they deposited and from it do they appear. . . . Likewise consider the unit “one” and

how all numbers emanate from it, yet it is not a number in itself, for it is the basis of all numbers.²⁶ The first entification²⁷ and emanation of the unit “one” is the number “one,” and from the number “one” do all numbers come into being. And now, these numbers, in the utmost simplicity and oneness, were folded up within the unit “one,” which was the hidden treasure of all numbers, and from which they emanated. Consider then that although from the “point” do all letters and words appear and from the unit “one” do all numbers emanate, neither doth the primal “point” descend from its station of transcendence nor is the unit “one” debarred from its kingdom of sanctity. Such is the station of the hidden treasure . . . (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 2:8–9, provisional translation)

GOD’S UNKNOWABILITY: THE FAILURE OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE TO COMPREHEND THE ESSENCE OF GOD

God is concealed from the eyes. The intellect can hope for no access to Him.

26 In the philosophy of Plotinus and a number of other Neoplatonists, “the One” is the ultimate reality and source of all existence. See Gerson and Wildberg.

27 Entification—sometimes rendered as specification or individuation—refers to the realization of an object of knowledge or, in other words, to an action through which an object which has an intelligible existence finds actual existence in the external world.

No mind can comprehend Him as He is in His own Self. No heart can partake of His remembrance. No tongue can sing His praise. Therefore, when His Chosen Ones speak of the promise of attaining to His Presence, urge us to call Him to mind, consider His recognition to be the foundation of faith, recognize that His remembrance brings peace to the hearts and tranquility to the souls, and mention His Name continually, we must contemplate the true meaning of these words and the reason They stress these principles.

This theme will be discussed separately. Suffice it to say here that not only the ordinary people but also the Chosen Ones of God are powerless to understand Him and as They tread this endless path, They grow in bewilderment. Therefore, They consider the knowledge of God to be beyond the ability of man, discredit those who claim to know God, view this very claim as a sign of inability and superficiality, and witness this disrespect with dismay. Since They find the knowledge of God to be impossible, They deem His remembrance and description inappropriate. Powerless to understand God, They pronounce His worship sacrilege.

All human attainment moveth upon a lame ass whilst Truth, riding upon the wind, darteth across space. (Rúmi ver. 3:3721, qtd. in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 132)

My very celebration of His praise is ungodliness for it evidenceth self-assertion, a

transgression so grievous. (Rúmi ver. 1:517)

The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh greatly emphasize this theme. That no book, epistle, or tablet can be found that does not refer to this theme or some of its premises and consequences is not an overstatement. Not only does Bahá'u'lláh describe and stress this theme Himself, but He also frequently cites the traditions of the past to substantiate it and demonstrates its truth according to the thoughts and beliefs of various peoples, nations, and religions. The Bahá'í Writings are replete with such passages as “No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving” (Qur’án 6:103, qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 19:1), “Nought of His knowledge do they comprehend” (Qur’án 2:255, qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthár* 7:301),²⁸ “God would have you beware of Himself” (Qur’án 3:28, in qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70), “We have failed to recognize Thee as befitteth Thy recognition,”²⁹ and “The way is barred, and all seeking rejected.”³⁰

Too numerous are the passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that

28 This passage from Qur’án 2:255 is quoted here in its translation by J. M. Rodwell.

29 A *ḥadīth* attributed to Muḥammad and quoted in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s commentary on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure,” published in the original language in *Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 2:29.

30 Attributed to Imám ‘Alí and quoted in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100.

proclaim God unknowable, incomprehensible, ineffable, and indescribable to quote them all here. Citing some examples here will suffice to demonstrate that our discussion of this theme is in accordance with, and derived from, the Bahá'í Writings:

Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. "No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving." (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70)

Immeasurably exalted is He above the strivings of human mind to grasp His Essence, or of human tongue to describe His mystery. (*Gleanings* 148:1)

Who is it that can claim to have attained the heights of His exalted Essence, and what mind can measure the depths of His unfathomable mystery? . . . How indescribably lofty are the tokens of His consummate power, a single sign of which, however inconsiderable, must transcend the comprehension of whatsoever hath, from the beginning that hath no beginning, been brought into being, or will be created in the future till the end that hath no end. All the Embodiments

of His Names wander in the wilderness of search, athirst and eager to discover His Essence, and all the Manifestations of His Attributes implore Him, from the Sinai of Holiness, to unravel His mystery. (*Gleanings* 26:1)

. . . no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. . . . Every attempt to attain to an understanding of His inaccessible Reality hath ended in complete bewilderment, and every effort to approach His exalted Self and envisage His Essence hath resulted in hopelessness and failure. . . . How can mine eye, which hath no faculty to perceive itself, claim to have discerned Thine Essence, and how can mine heart, already powerless to apprehend the significance of its own potentialities, pretend to have comprehended Thy nature? . . . The portals of Thy grace have throughout eternity been open, and the means of access unto Thy Presence made available, unto all created things, and the revelations of Thy matchless Beauty have at all times been imprinted upon the realities of all beings, visible and invisible. Yet, notwithstanding this most gracious favor, this perfect and consummate bestowal, I am moved to testify that Thy court

of holiness and glory is immeasurably exalted above the knowledge of all else besides Thee, and the mystery of Thy Presence is inscrutable to every mind except Thine own. . . . How vast the number of those heavenly and all-glorious beings who, in the wilderness of their separation from Thee, have wandered all the days of their lives, and failed in the end to find Thee! How great the multitude of the sanctified and immortal souls who were lost and bewildered while seeking in the desert of search to behold Thy face! Myriad are Thine ardent lovers whom the consuming flame of remoteness from Thee hath caused to sink and perish, and numberless are the faithful souls who have willingly laid down their lives in the hope of gazing on the light of Thy countenance. The sighs and moans of these longing hearts that pant after Thee can never reach Thy holy court, neither can the lamentations of the wayfarers that thirst to appear before Thy face attain Thy seat of glory. (*Gleanings* 26:3-4)

How lofty hath been His incorruptible Essence, how completely independent of the knowledge of all created things, and how immensely exalted will it remain above the praise of all the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth! (*Gleanings* 124:1)

Say: The grace of God can never

be adequately understood; how much less can His own Self, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting, be comprehended! (*Summons* 37)

Whosoever layeth claim to have known His Essence is without doubt among the most ignorant of all people. Every atom in the universe would charge such a man with imposture, and to this beareth witness My tongue which speaketh naught but the truth. (*Summons* 55)

Too high is the All-Merciful for the hearts of those who have recognized Him to apprehend His true nature, or for the minds of men to hope to fathom His essence. He verily is exalted above the understanding of anyone besides Himself, and sanctified beyond the comprehension of all else save Him. From all eternity He hath been independent of the entire creation. (*Summons* 153)

No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever fathomed the nature of His Being. In the valley of His knowledge every mystic wandereth astray; in the comprehension of His Essence every saint standeth bewildered. Sanctified is He above the understanding of the wise; exalted is He beyond the knowledge of the knowing! "The way is barred and all seeking rejected. His proof is His signs, His evidence His being."

Wherefore the lovers of the countenance of the Beloved have said, “O Thou Whose Essence alone can lead to His Essence, and Who transcendeth all likeness to His creatures”. How can utter nothingness spur its charger in the arena of eternity, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun? (*Call 2:45–46*)

. . . every man of understanding hath acknowledged his powerlessness to attain the sacred realms of His knowledge and every pure in heart hath confessed his failure to soar to the heights of His mention and His praise. He, verily, overshadoweth all created things and He, in truth, is the Almighty, the Most Bountiful. (*Súratu'l-Hajj, in Áthár 4:95, provisional translation*)

Know thou, moreover, that none can ever hope to approach Him and all others are as nothing when compared with Him. He, verily, is the All-Powerful, the Most Glorious, the Best-Beloved. . . . The comprehension of His creatures can never be associated with Him, if ye be of them that comprehend. (*Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 38:223–24, provisional translation*)

Thou didst prescribe no other path for anyone to know Thee besides utter powerlessness and didst destine no other refuge for anyone to

fly to save absolute nothingness. O my God, the tongues fall short of attaining Thy praise and the minds are sore perplexed when seeking to comprehend the essence of Thy beauty. (*Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 65:273–74, provisional translation*)

How, otherwise, can utter nothingness magnify the Name of Him Who hath, by a word, brought creation into being, and how can an evanescent creature extol Him Who hath demonstrated that no description can ever express Him and no word of praise magnify His glory? He hath from everlasting been immeasurably exalted above the understanding of His creatures and sanctified from the conceptions of His servants. (*Tablets 113*)

Every man of understanding hath been so bewildered at Thy knowledge, and every man endowed with insight been so perplexed in his attempt to fathom the signs of Thy great glory, that all have recognized their powerlessness to visualize, and their impotence to soar into, the heaven wherefrom one of the Luminaries of the Manifestations of Thy knowledge and of the Day-Springs of Thy wisdom hath shone forth. Who is he that shall befittingly describe this most sublime station and this most august seat—the seat which, as decreed by Thee, transcendeth the comprehension of Thy creatures and

the testimonies of Thy servants, and which hath everlastingly been hid from the understanding and the knowledge of men, and been closed with the seal of Thy name, the Self-Subsisting. (*Prayers* 176:34)

Too high art Thou for the praise of those who are nigh unto Thee to ascend unto the heaven of Thy nearness, or for the birds of the hearts of them who are devoted to Thee to attain to the door of Thy gate. (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 92)

Exalted art Thou above my praise and the praise of anyone beside me, above my description and the description of all who are in heaven and all who are on earth! (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 96)

The highest expressions of praise and glory from either human pen or tongue cannot transcend human limitations and infinite is the distance between the Most Sublime Vision and the station of man. How great the difference between all that pertaineth to man and a station which is immeasurably sanctified above the inmost essence of sanctity and purity. . . . Of old it hath been revealed: "The way is barred and the path rejected."³¹

In truth, to make mention of God, exalted be His glory and encompassing be His grace, and to celebrate His praise are unseemly. For the way to that sanctuary is barred and the path to that mystery, that mystery of all mysteries, is forbidden. How great the difference between the visible assemblage and the invisible solitude. Where is the path to be found and what of the way? For the pen to make mention of the Ancient of Days is like unto an ant glorifying the Lord and for the tongue to sing the praise of the Best-Beloved of the worlds is even as a mere atom pointing to the sun or a mere drop telling of the ocean. . . . thou knowest that the Unseen Reality is sanctified from, and immeasurably exalted above, the description of the dwellers of the realm of the seen. Inasmuch as the men of insight and the beholders of the Most Sublime Vision thus testify unto this indubitable truth, no recourse is there, nor hath there ever been, save reliance upon His Chosen Ones. (Tablet to to Áqá Mírzá Áqá Afnán, in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 31:107, provisional translation)

No praise which any being is able to utter can ever hope to reach Him, neither can the thanksgiving of all created things ever gain

31 An alternative form of this passage, attributed to Imám 'Alí, is also quoted time and again in the Bahá'í Writings: "The way is barred and all seeking rejected." Provisional translation of an

excerpt from an Arabic-Persian Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, published in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 15:132.

admittance into the Court of His Presence. No search can lead to Him Who hath neither likeness nor peer. The sages and the mystics are powerless to describe Him and the learned and the wise confess their inability.³²

PROOFS OF THE POWERLESSNESS
OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE TO
COMPREHEND THE ESSENCE OF GOD

Although no sensible observer requires evidence as to the inability of human knowledge to comprehend God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá sets forth proofs and elaborate arguments and enumerates ample evidence and examples in order to demonstrate its truth. In this essay, we list these proofs and cite passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh in their support.

*ONE: TO COMPREHEND AN OBJECT,
WE MUST FIRST ENCOMPASS IT*

In other words, the object of our comprehension must be contained within our mind. Unless and until we encompass an object, comprehension is impossible, or at best incomplete and relative—that is, in proportion to our imperfect conception and the limited capacity of our mind.

It follows, then, that we must confess our powerlessness to comprehend God, for comprehension is the result of encompassing and God can never be encompassed. We can only hope

to form an imagination of a finite and incomplete reality, within the intrinsic limits of our mind, and consider this imagination to be the comprehension of God. It is needless to say that the finite, incomplete, and relative reality we imagine is far from the reality of God's Essence and attributes—and His attributes are identical to His Essence.

*TWO: GOD IS OUR CREATOR AND WE
ARE HIS CREATURES*

Every creator has knowledge of his creation. This knowledge is an active knowledge, one that originates and actualizes the object of one's knowledge. In other words, the existence of the created object is dependent upon this knowledge. Creation, however, can never know the creator. By virtue of being created, it emanates—hence separates—from its creator. This separation between the two persists so long as one is a creator and the other the creation. Therefore, creation can hope for no access to its creator unless it is allowed to ascend to the station of creator, unite with it, return to it, and die in its essence, in order to overcome their separation. As will be explored later in this essay, Bahá'ís believe that this is not possible, except for the Manifestations of God and only in Their station of essential unity. No painting can ever recognize its painter and no handiwork can hope to comprehend its craftsman.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

No creature hath ever recognized Him as befitteth His recognition, nor hath any man ever praised

32 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.

Him as is worthy of His praise. For all things visible have appeared through but a single letter of the word of His command that encompasseth the innermost realities of all created things.... How, therefore, can such as is created through but a melody of the voices of His utterance ascend unto the heavens of His eternity? (*Hadíqiy-i-'Irfán* 110, provisional translation)

THREE: NO INFERIOR BEING CAN COMPREHEND THAT WHICH IS SUPERIOR

The superior stage possesses the properties of the inferior and is, therefore, to some extent familiar with it. The inferior stage, on the contrary, does not possess the properties of the superior one and cannot duly recognize it. For example, the animal, in addition to the animal life and the properties of the animal kingdom, also possesses the vegetable life and the characteristics that emanate from this kingdom, such as the consumption of food and respiration. But the animal, as long as it belongs to the animal kingdom, cannot attain the rational faculty, nor realize its attributes—proceeding from premises to the conclusion and deducing the unknown from the known. If in the world of creation the inferior stage cannot comprehend the superior, the same can be inferred *a fortiori* between the creation and the Divinity: human knowledge, which is relative and contingent, can never comprehend the Absolute and Necessary Being.

FOUR: THE ESSENCE OF THINGS IS UNKNOWABLE AND UNFATHOMABLE; THEREFORE, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO FULLY COMPREHEND ANYTHING

We can only know the attributes that emerge from things to the extent that they are presented to our knowledge and interact with our comprehension. The essence of things always remains separate from us and unknown, unless, in comprehending something, its essence is transformed into ours, the otherness between the two is eliminated, and the subject and the object of knowledge become one. If we cannot know the essence of any created being, understanding the Essence of God is, with greater reason, beyond the limits of our capacity. It is possible to know the attributes of created beings while their essence remains unknown; however, since the attributes of God are identical with His Essence, the unknowability of His Essence is tantamount to the unknowability of His attributes. In other words, since we cannot understand the Essence of God, neither can we understand His attributes.

FIVE: GOD IS THE EVER-INVISIBLE; MAN IS IN THE VISIBLE PLANE

For God to be known, He must emerge from the Invisible realm and manifest Himself in the visible world. So long as this does not take place, neither can His recognition. Insofar as He is concealed from the eyes and minds, He remains Unseen and Unknown. Were He to be known, He would cease to be termed the Invisible God.

The name “the Invisible” is applicable so long as He is not seen. In such a case, He is not visible that He may be made known. And were He to be seen, His name “the Invisible” would no longer exist that He may be recognized as such. Wherefore, He hath ever been and shall ever remain invisible and unknown. Blessed is the one who pondereth upon this absolute, this unmistakable Word of God and recognizeth the gem that is treasured therein. Whoso claimeth to have known the Invisible, in the sense that He is the Invisible, he speaketh not the truth. Immeasurably exalted is that Ancient Beauty above the recognition of all else besides Him and sanctified is He beyond the praise of anyone save His own unknowable Essence. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthár* 6:29, provisional translation)

THEISM AND IDOLATRY

Since we cannot know God—that is, we cannot contain Him within the limits of our powerless understanding—that which we love and worship as God, and which we claim to have recognized, is a finite reality that is a form of creation. He is a deity that is a figment of man's imagination and is fashioned by the human mind. Instead of man's creator, he is man's creation. To worship him is tantamount to praising our own creation as the Object of our adoration. If this is our own situation, how can we criticize idol-worshippers, who also worship what they create?

At least, what the idolaters carve and worship has an existence that can be sensed. What God-worshippers create and call God is utterly fictitious.³³ Bahá'u'lláh writes: “that which the creation comprehendeth at the highest degrees of its mystic knowledge is nothing but an illusion of comprehension, an idle fancy originated of themselves for themselves. Immeasurably exalted is the pre-existent above the knowledge of the originated” (*Áthár* 6:29, provisional translation).

CONFESSION OF THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD TO THEIR POWERLESSNESS TO COMPREHEND HIM

Not only the generality of humankind, but also the Chosen Ones amongst them, Those in the highest degrees of mystic knowledge—namely, the Manifestations of God—are powerless to know the Essence of God. This is because differences in degrees in the world of existence prevent the inferior being from understanding the superior. So long as the Manifestations of God are in the station of distinction and limitation and viewed in the standpoint of Their humanity, They are, notwithstanding Their sublime station and exalted character, separate from God,

33 All that is said in these pages about the powerlessness of man to understand God is from the Writings and utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that elucidate and explain the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh on this theme. See, for example, *Selections* nos. 2, 21, and 24; *Some Answered Questions* no. 37; *Paris Talks* no. 5; and *Promulgation* no. 125.

different from Him, inferior to Him, and created by Him. Conversely, viewed in the station of Their essential unity—in Their connection to the Source, union with God, dying to the self, and living in Him—there is no mention of understanding Him, since the subject of understanding unites with the object and ceases to exist distinctively. Whenever They speak of understanding God, sing His praise, or offer Him thanksgiving, They regard these very acts as proof that They remain far from God, assert Their independent existence before Him, and fall short of utter nothingness, which is the highest station of devotion and the ultimate pre-requisite of worship. Confessing Their ingratitude, They lament having remembered God and having celebrated His praise. As though They have committed a grave sin, They repent: “The good deeds of the righteous are the sins of the near ones.”³⁴ Sometimes, owing to the requirements of Their humanity, They think Themselves bound to remember God and make mention of Him, and seek forgiveness. At times, They recognize Their worship, remembrance, and praise of God to be in response to His bidding, His permission, His grace, and His bounty:

Exalted, immeasurably exalted art
Thou above mine attempt to ever
make mention of Thee or to extol
Thee. Even were all mankind to

approach Thee with their glorification of Thy oneness, verily I hope to draw nigh unto Thee with my confession of impiety before Thee, for none save Thee can ever laud Thy oneness inasmuch as the slightest whispering of aught else except Thyself is the mightiest proof of Thine inaccessible sublimity and the very presence of duality is the most potent evidence of Thine unattainable loftiness. Glorified, immensely glorified art Thou! And if all mankind approach Thee by celebrating Thy praise, verily I seek to draw nigh unto Thee by sanctifying Thee from the glorification of anyone except Thine own Self and exalting Thee above the praise of all else but Thyself inasmuch as the very existence of description indicateth separation from that which is being described. . . . (The Báb, Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 82:54, provisional translation)

Thou seest, O my Lord, my dwelling-place in the heart of this mountain and Thou dost witness my forbearance. Verily I have desired naught else but Thy love and the love of those who love Thee. How can I extol the effulgent beauty of Thy Lordship, conscious as I am of my nothingness before the habitation of Thy glory? Yet the sorrow of solitude and loneliness prompteth me to invoke Thee through this prayer, perchance Thy trusted servants may become

34 This statement is attributed to Al-Junayd Al-Baghdádí or Abú Sa'íd Al-Kharráz.

aware of my lamentations, may supplicate unto Thee on my behalf, and Thou wouldst graciously answer their prayers as a token of Thy grace and Thy favor. I bear witness that there is no God but Thee, inasmuch as Thou art invested with sovereignty, grandeur, glory and power which no one among Thy servants can visualize or comprehend. Indeed Thou shalt, by virtue of that which is inherent in Thine Essence, ever remain inscrutable unto all except Thyself. (The Báb, *Selections* 7:47)

Unto all eternity none except Thyself shall ever comprehend Thee nor anyone save Thine own Self ever worship Thee as befiteth Thy oneness, for knowledge shall be fulfilled only following union and oneness shall be established only after separation. Such is impossible in the realms of certitude inasmuch as from eternity Thou hast existed with no description in the world of creation and unto all eternity Thou wilt continue to be one and the same with no praise in the entire universe. (The Báb, Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 86:186, provisional translation)

Wert Thou, O my God, to afflict me with all Thy chastisement for evermore, for as long as Thine own Essence endureth, as a punishment for uttering any word

before Thy presence, I would in truth be deserving thereof . . .³⁵

The above passages as well as numerous others from the Writings of the Báb demonstrate the truth of the statements in this theme. Several extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are also quoted below in support of this theme:

All the Prophets of God and their chosen Ones, all the divines, the sages, and the wise of every generation, unanimously recognize their inability to attain unto the comprehension of that Quintessence of all truth, and confess their incapacity to grasp Him, Who is the inmost Reality of all things. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70)

Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, "Thou shalt never behold Me!"; whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, "Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!" (*Gleanings* 26:3)

"[A]ttainment unto the divine Presence" is in this sense obviously possible to no one, inasmuch as this revelation is confined to the

35 Provisional translation of an excerpt from the Writings of the Báb.

innermost Essence, unto which no man can attain. "The way is barred, and all seeking rejected." The minds of the favorites of heaven, however high they soar, can never attain this station, how much less the understanding of obscured and limited minds. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100)

Notwithstanding my certitude that the praise of naught except Him can befittingly magnify His glory and my confession that the description of none save His own Self can express Him, I make mention of Him in mine obedience to that which He hath sent down in His perspicuous Book. In truth, the world of the heart rejoiceth not save in His praise, and no delight followeth the sorrows of the hearts and the anguish of the souls save in His remembrance. The remembrance of His Name is the dawning-place of exultation and His praise the day-spring of the sun of rapture. (Tablet to Abu'l-Ḥasan-i-Ardikání, in Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 15:179, provisional translation)

The tongues and the eyes, all knowledge and understanding, and their signs and fruits that have come into being through but a single word proceeding from Him have never been nor will ever be worthy of His court. However, as the Lord of Names hath caused His remembrance

and praise to emanate from the Source of the Revelation through His loving-kindness, we cleave to the cord of His remembrance and cling to the hem of His praise.³⁶

Glory be to the Desire of the world Who, from time immemorial, hath been sanctified from all glorification. The quintessence of praise beseemeth the Lord of Names, He to Whose exaltation above every praise by aught else save Himself have testified all that are wholly devoted to His Cause, the favored among the faithful, and they that truly uphold His unity. And as the sea of His loving-kindness surged and the fragrance of His grace was diffused, as a token of His favor and bounty He granted the glorification of His unknowable Essence and permitted the praise of His impenetrable Being. Thus were the tongues, through the splendors of the day-star of His leave, strengthened and emboldened to make mention of Him. For otherwise, how can the essence of negation appear in the arena of affirmation and utter nothingness set foot in the realm of immortality? His bounty did succor and His grace did grant leave. (*Áthár* 6:198, provisional translation)

36 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.

“WE HAVE FAILED
TO RECOGNIZE THEE
AS BEFITTEH THY RECOGNITION”

To prove this point—namely, the confession of the Prophets of God and their chosen ones to their powerlessness to comprehend His Essence—many Bahá'í Writings quote words to this effect attributed to Muḥammad. The following passage from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is but one example:

Salutation and praise be upon that merciful essence, that eternal Manifestation, that radiant temple Who ordained and guided, Who manifested and bestowed, Who gathered and summoned, proclaiming: “We have failed to recognize Thee as befitteh Thy recognition.”³⁷ He, in truth, is the peerless luminary Who, in elucidating the Essence of the Lord of all worlds, illuminated the vast immensity with the rays of certitude, confessed His powerlessness and failure, and acknowledged being debarred and prevented. For verily, the acme of human understanding is the confession of helplessness to recognize Him. Otherwise, the people of oblivion lay claim to the knowledge of the Essence of the All-Merciful out of the growing intensity of their rebellion, whereas all that they vainly believe to have discerned and expressed in their subtlest terms is

but an imagination of their minds or a contemplation of their hearts that can hardly quench the thirst or remedy the feeble. (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 1:133–134, provisional translation)

It can be seen that the Interpreter of the Word exalts the station of Muḥammad, quotes His words, “We have failed to recognize Thee as befitteh Thy recognition,” stresses that the highest form of the quest to know God is to confess one’s powerlessness to recognize Him, and alludes to the following tradition attributed to Imám ‘Alí: “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.” This indicates that what is found in the Bahá'í Writings concerning the impossibility of knowing God and the necessity of avoiding any such claim constitutes the foundation and the essence of all religions, accepting which is a duty of all who believe in God.

“HE HATH KNOWN GOD WHO HATH
KNOWN HIMSELF”

An important discussion in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that is relevant to the theme of God’s unknowability is His commentary on the Islamic tradition “He hath known God who hath known himself.”³⁸ Suggesting that if one

38 The English translation of most passages from this commentary is published in *Gleanings* no. 83. It is published in the original Arabic in *Majmú‘iy-i-Alváḥ* 351–54.

37 *Aḥadith* attributed to Muḥammad.

knows oneself, then one knows one's Creator, this *hadith* appears to open a door toward God and pave the way for knowing Him. A closer examination demonstrates, however, that likening the knowledge of God to the knowledge of self in this statement confirms the comments and conclusions offered thus far about the theology that stems from the Bahá'í Writings.

The rational soul is a single faculty the evidences of whose activity become manifest in various body parts, as numerous powers, senses, and movements. For instance, instruments such as sight, hearing, speech, will, purpose, and motion are evidences of the activity of the rational faculty in the human body and without these evidences it is impossible to know the soul. In other words, unless and until the rational soul desires its agency, ordains a particular purpose, exercises a specific function, and manifests itself as a certain behavior, its existence can never be concluded. What is known as self-reflection, therefore, is one's awareness of a state of one's soul, for instance when reflecting upon one's fear, anger, lust, sorrow, or decision. Otherwise, the essence of the soul, when considered in the absence of any manifestation or evidence of its activity, is unknowable.

If we close our eyes and turn our attention inwards, we find an image of an object we have seen and remembered, a sorrow we have experienced from an event, a love we feel towards a friend, a grudge we bear against an enemy, a longing we have to attain a goal, a decision we make to reach a destination,

or a similar state. There is nothing else to find. That is to say, no reflection on the inner self can reveal something that can be named the essence of the human soul. Therefore, the statement, "He hath known God who hath known himself," means that the essence of God, like the essence of the rational soul, is unknowable. Just as we comprehend our soul in the form it manifests itself in our various states and conditions and the function it performs through the agency of our different body parts, we can also know God by recognizing His Manifestations. Otherwise, there is no path to Him, nor does any direct tie bind Him to us. Any claim to the knowledge of His Essence or to unity with Him is refuted: "The way is barred, and all seeking rejected."³⁹

PROXIMITY AND REMOTENESS

God is the creator, the origin, and the animating source of all things. Every created thing has stepped into the realm of being through a share of the divine revelation it has received. So God's existence and knowledge encompass all things. God is close to everything; He is indeed closer to all beings than their own selves. We, however, remain heedless of this divine revelation at some times and become aware of it at others. God is always near; we might be close to Him or far from Him. "Wonder not, if my Best-Loved be closer to me than mine own self; wonder at this, that

39 Attributed to Imám 'Alí and quoted in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100.

I, despite such nearness, should still be so far from Him.”⁴⁰ This mention of proximity and remoteness is no doubt in relation to the revelation of God in this world and the outpourings of His manifestation which reaches His creation. Otherwise, there can be no separation or union, no nearness or remoteness between His necessary Essence and the contingent world. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

[T]he one true God is in Himself exalted beyond and above proximity and remoteness. His reality transcendeth such limitations. His relationship to His creatures knoweth no degrees. That some are near and others are far is to be ascribed to the manifestations themselves.

. . . How often hath the human heart, which is the recipient of the light of God and the seat of the revelation of the All-Merciful, erred from Him Who is the Source of that light and the Wellspring of that revelation. It is the waywardness of the heart that removeth it far from God, and condemneth it to remoteness from Him. Those hearts, however, that are aware of His Presence, are close to Him, and are to be regarded as having drawn nigh unto His throne.

Consider, moreover, how

frequently doth man become forgetful of his own self, whilst God remaineth, through His all-encompassing knowledge, aware of His creature, and continueth to shed upon him the manifest radiance of His glory. It is evident, therefore, that, in such circumstances, He is closer to him than his own self. He will, indeed, so remain forever, for, whereas the one true God knoweth all things, perceiveth all things, and comprehendeth all things, mortal man is prone to err, and is ignorant of the mysteries that lie enfolded within him. . . . (*Gleanings* 93:4–6)

Every man of insight observeth with the eye of discernment that proximity and remoteness are to be ascribed to the manifestations themselves. Immeasurably exalted is that Ancient King above any proximity and remoteness, above all mentions, names, and attributes. In this sense, nearness to God consisteth in turning towards Him, and remoteness in remaining heedless of Him. (*Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 1:58–59, provisional translation)

This essay has thus far attempted to exalt the Essence of God and to refute any notion of a direct tie between the world of God and the world of creation by introducing passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh on this theme. It is worth noting that any such attempt to exalt God—in which such names and

40 A verse from Sa'dí's *Gulistán* and quoted in a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh, published in *Gleanings* no. 93. It alludes to the statement, “We are closer to man than his life-vein,” in Qur'án 50:16.

attributes as single, simple, nonde-limited, and incorporeal are ascribed to Him—conforms to the bounds of human existence and is subject to our narrow understanding and limited conception. Otherwise, nothing can be said about the Essence of God as He is in Himself: whatever can fit the limits of our finite language, be it an expression of His transcendence, singleness, simplicity, nondelimitation, or incorporeality, is not befitting His station. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Had it not been incumbent upon me to abide by Thy bidding and to submit to Thy command, I would have exalted Thee above my knowledge of Thy unity and beyond my mention of Thy Self. For who am I to praise Thee? Every praise which ascendeth from me is in accordance with mine own measure, not with Thine. It is a sin that proceedeth from the sin of my very existence and a trespass that ariseth from the trespass of mine inmost reality.⁴¹

Although to deem God exalted above any comparison, likeness, or peer is the acme of human understanding in the eyes of men, even as it marketh the highest and the most exalted station amongst the people, yet even this distinction must needs depend upon the sanction of God and is conditioned

upon the confirmation of His Will. ... Otherwise, that Ocean of eternity is sanctified from all such contrived words and the Court of His Presence is exalted above all these statements. Let all fix their gaze upon the fundamentals of the Cause of God, not upon the loftiness or the lowliness of the stations of human understanding in words, such as is established amongst the people. (*Iqtidárát* 89, provisional translation)

Therefore, there can be no doubt that any word that describes God, in order to exalt His station, like all the names and attributes of God, refers to the Manifestations of His Cause. All we can understand about God lies within the bounds of human understanding of the revelation of God in the world of creation and of the effusion of His outpourings through His Manifestations among the people.

THE REVELATION OF GOD

Thus far, this essay has elaborated the Bahá'í view of the transcendence of God and provided excerpts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh in its support. There can be no doubt, following a careful study of these passages, that the Bahá'ís exalt the Essence of God, deem His existence to be transcendent above all else, consider His reality unknowable and His threshold unattainable, and reject any notion of similarity and relation between God and His creation. Their conviction in the transcendence

41 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh.

of God finds its root in the explicit Text of the Bahá'í Writings and in the outward evidences in the world of creation, and not in individual interpretations of these passages, which could be questioned or refuted. It is, after all, forbidden to corrupt the Text and distort its explicit meaning: "Whoso interpreteth what hath been sent down from the heaven of Revelation, and altereth its evident meaning, he, verily, is of them that have perverted the Sublime Word of God, and is of the lost ones in the Lucid Book" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶105).

EMANATION FROM GOD

God has ever been and will forever be the Creator; His being the Creator has neither beginning nor end ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 47). All are His creatures and have been created at His behest. Every created being emanates from Him and enjoys a degree of existence in this emanational procession. The existence of each being, therefore, is an effusion of grace outpouring from the Source. Should this grace be withheld, the being will return to non-existence. Every being then, owing to its very existence, carries a sign of God. In other words, stepping into the realm of being signifies receiving a share of God's grace.

It must be emphasized that God does not appear as anything, nor does He become incarnate in anything. The views of anthropomorphists,⁴²

who perceive God in human form, or pantheists⁴³ completely differ from those of the Bahá'ís.⁴⁴ The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh explicitly assert that the world of creation emanates from God, but God does not appear in it. The existence of every created thing is the outpouring of God's grace, emanating from His absolute existence, and limited in its form through the emanational procession according to the will of God and commensurate with each stage and station, thus taking a unique form in each degree of existence. The difference in stages and stations is the cause of plurality and diversity in the world of creation. The effusion of this outpouring can never cause the nondelimited divine Reality to divide into parts, dissolve into other forms, or become incarnate in things. It is this outpouring of God's grace, this emanational procession, that has long been referred to as the "revelation of God" in the works

in deities with human forms and qualities. Throughout history, mythologies have represented God with human appearance and personality. Some anthropomorphic deities have included the gods of love, wealth, rain, war, and fertility. A literal interpretation of biblical verses such as Genesis 1:27, concerning the creation of humankind in God's image, might lead one to espouse an anthropomorphic vision of God.

43 Pantheists believe that nothing exists as distinct from God and that everything is identical with, or is a part—or a mode—of an immanent God.

44 Bahá'ís reject any notion of God's immanence and stress His absolute transcendence. This theme is elaborated in *Some Answered Questions* nos. 53–54.

42 Anthropomorphism is the belief

of mystics⁴⁵—a phrase also adopted in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

REVELATION VERSUS APPEARANCE AND INCARNATION

While God is transcendent above all things, His revelation encompasses them. To differentiate revelation from appearance or incarnation, the emanation of existence from its Source can be likened to the rays of the sun illuminating all things. The earth's share of the sun's illumination and the sun's reflection in everything is commensurate with the difference in stations and stages: a mirror reflects the rays of the sun more than a stone does. But the emanation of light from the sun and its association with the mirror does not mean that the sun itself descends from its height and enters into the mirror. Another example can be given: when a carpenter builds a bed, some thought, knowledge, or creativity proceeds from his soul and relates to the material in a specific form commensurate with the properties of the wood. Through the influence of this effusion emanating from the carpenter's soul, the wood takes the form of a bed. So, the existence of the bed demonstrates the existence of the carpenter; it signifies the share of the grace the wood has received from the carpenter's soul. But it can never be said that the carpenter's soul, thought, or knowledge has suffered a decrease and dissolved into the form of the bed,

or exited the carpenter's being and become incarnate in his creation. These examples only serve to illustrate the point and clarify its meaning, but not to discover the truth of the matter. Like all parables, they merit emphasis only to a point. And the point is that the world is not God, it is from God; neither does He enter the world. Bahá'u'lláh 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 (*Tablets* 60–61).

He also writes:

[T]he sages have stated: "The uncompounded reality is all things, yet it is not any one thing," and in

45 For an example, refer to *At-Tajalliyátu'l-Iláhiyyih*.

another instance: “The splendors of the uncompounded reality are visible in all things.” This dependeth upon the eye of the beholder and the view of the observer. They whose sight is keen perceive in all things the evidences of His supreme singleness, inasmuch as all beings manifest the Divine Names. God hath ever been and will forever be sanctified from ascent and descent and transcendent above all limitation, association, and relationship, while all created things exist and are visible in the plane of limitation. (Lawḥ-i-Basīṭatu'l-Ḥaḳíqih, in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7:141, provisional translation)

He further states:

In this respect, the effulgences emanating from the signs of the uncompounded reality are evident and resplendent in all created things. The intention of the sage was not to state that God is cast into infinite forms of being. Exalted, immeasurably exalted, is He above being cast into any element, being restricted by any limitation, or being associated with anything in the entire creation. He hath from all eternity been immensely exalted beyond all else but Himself and sanctified from all save His own Self. We testify that He is One in His Essence, One in His Attributes and that all are in the grasp of His power which pervadeth all created things.

(Lawḥ-i-Basīṭatu'l-Ḥaḳíqih, in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* 7:142, provisional translation)

THE APPEARANCE OF GOD'S NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES

The Essence of God—implicit within which, or identical to which, are His attributes—transcends the creation. Without descending from its height, without any decomposition, dissolution, or partition, it is the Source of all grace. The effusion of grace in its emanational procession takes a unique form in each degree of existence and appears differently subject to the limits of each station. Plurality thus appears and the diverse creatures, whose existence emanates from the single Source of all effusion in the invisible world, emerge in the visible world.⁴⁶ It is in this world

46 Ibnu'l-'Arabi (*Al-Futūḥātu'l-Makkiyyih*, passim; vol. 3, ch. 146; vol. 4, ch. 206; vol. 5, ch. 312) describes the process of God's revelation through which plurality emanates from one and the originated from the pre-existent. Several themes related to this thought, including the objects of God's knowledge, Fixed Entities, the Most Holy Outpouring, and the Holy Outpouring, are explored in several Writings of the Central Figures of the Faith, such as Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and Lawḥ-i-Salmán (*Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ* 128–160), the Báb's *Tafsír-i-Nubuvvat-i-Khāṣṣih* (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 14:321–384) and *Tafsíru'l-Há'* (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 86:99–154), 'Abdu'l-Bahá's commentaries on the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure” and on the Basmala (*Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá*

of plurality and diversity that, owing to the different degrees of revelation and the various levels of existence, the names and attributes⁴⁷ appear. To each

1:33–62), as well as His exposition in *Some Answered Questions* no. 82. According to Ibnu'l-'Arabí, God, Who is in a station of Supreme Singleness within His Essence, reveals Himself to His own Essence in a specific revelation known as the Most Holy Outpouring—a revelation which results in God's knowledge of His essential names and attributes as well as of subjects of His knowledge of all things. The subjects of God's knowledge, referred to as Fixed Entities, have a pre-existent intellectual existence in God's knowledge, but no formal existence, and are, therefore, one with His Essence. In this station of Divine Oneness, the whole creation exists in an intellectual multiplicity in God's knowledge. In a secondary revelation, referred to as the Holy Outpouring, the intellectual reality of the world of creation finds formal existence and the entification of the distinctions and degrees of things that once enjoyed unity in God's knowledge manifests itself, through a single revelation, as diversity in their formal existence.

47 Names and attributes both signify the essence of things, albeit differently. In Islamic scholastic theology, a name is a term that refers to the pure essence. Examples of names include God, woman, and human. It also refers to an essence which is characterized by an attribute, such as the All-Knowing and the Almighty, or to an essence which is the source of an action, such as the Sustainer and the Creator. An attribute, however, only signifies a source unbounded by a characterization of an essence, such as knowledge, might, sustenance, and creation.

degree of existence that emanates from the Supreme Singleness, and therefore takes a unique form and enjoys individuality, a name and an attribute is given. All beings, therefore, are the manifestations of the names and attributes of God. It must be stressed that names and attributes are only properties of the world of creation; they do not apply to the unseen realm of God. It is also worth noting that every name and attribute—inasmuch as it signifies, within the limitations of its own being, the effusion of existence that emanates from God—insofar as it evidences the one effusion, is synonymous with every other name and attribute. All the names and attributes indicate a single Reality and this is what is described as the “true appearance of the Divine Unity” in the Bahá'í Writings (*Call* 6:10). These names can be used interchangeably and they can be called upon equally to invoke God: “By whichsoever name ye will, invoke him, for He hath most excellent names” (Qur'an 17:110, qtd. in *Gems* ¶45).

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

O seeker! Regard not the divine names and attributes as idle fancy. Know thou that all that is created betwixt earth and heaven hath ever been and will continue to be the manifestation of the names of God and the embodiment of His attributes, exalted be His glory. At best, the station of man excelleth and his rank transcendeth those of the rest of creation. Shouldst thou ascend unto the heaven wherein

one seeth no distinction amongst His creatures, thou canst see neither difference nor flaw in the Divine creation and the manifestations of His handiwork. (Lawḥ-i-Sarráj, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:9, provisional translation)

He further states that “in a sense all things have ever been and shall ever remain the manifestations of the names and attributes of God” (*Tabernacle* 2:9). He also writes:

One of the senses in which God may be described is that insofar as the evidences of His effulgences are manifest in all things, to the least of His signs that are visible on the earth all of His names and attributes are applicable. For the most excellent names that are addressed to it pertain unto that Divine revelation which hath shed its light, for no reason whatever, upon that sign. . . . (*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 144, provisional translation)

The following are excerpts from the Writings and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that elaborate the above passages:

The originated is powerless to conceive the reality of the pre-existent. Even as He—peace be upon Him—said: “We have failed to recognize Thee as becometh Thy recognition.”⁴⁸ But the contingent,

insofar as its existence and conditions are concerned, dependeth upon the grace of the Necessary Being. Therefore, He Who is the Invisible, the Inaccessible, and beyond the reach of mind, shed the light of His names and attributes upon the realities of things. All things take their portion of the grace of God and the revelation of the All-Merciful. “Neither is there aught which doth not celebrate His praise.”⁴⁹ (*Khiṭábát* 1:6, provisional translation).

That which we imagine, is not the Reality of God; He, the Unknowable, the Unthinkable, is far beyond the highest conception of man.

All creatures that exist are dependent upon the Divine Bounty. Divine Mercy gives life itself. As the light of the sun shines on the whole world, so the Mercy of the infinite God is shed on all creatures. (*Paris Talks* 5:10–11)

. . . the Essence of Divinity, the Sun of Truth, shines forth upon all horizons and is spreading its rays upon all things. Each creature is the recipient of some portion of that power . . . (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 23)

“No vision taketh in Him, but He

Muḥammad.

⁴⁹ Qur'án 17:44, qtd, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99.

48 A statement attributed to

taketh in all vision: He is the Subtile, the All-Informed."⁵⁰

When, however, thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being, with evidences which none will deny save the froward and the unaware. Then wilt thou observe that the universe is a scroll that discloseth His hidden secrets, which are preserved in the well-guarded Tablet. And not an atom of all the atoms in existence, not a creature from amongst the creatures but speaketh His praise and telleth of His attributes and names, revealeth the glory of His might and guideth to His oneness and His mercy: and none will gainsay this who hath ears to hear, eyes to see, and a mind that is sound.

And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Daystar's splendors, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 19:7–8)

THE UNIVERSAL REVELATION

All created beings, because they exist—because they have taken their portion of existence—and are recipients of the outpouring emanating from the Source of existence, are revealers of the splendors of God. In this sense, no distinction can be made among God's creatures, except the difference in their degrees of existence or in their share of God's revelation. Seeing some creatures as high or low, as exalted or abased, or as good or evil should not stop us from recognizing them all as recipients of God's grace and manifestations of His universal revelation. A confession of Divine unity requires us to believe that the source of all being is the Essence of God; that no form of existence is insignificant, trivial, unworthy, or futile; that ugliness, evil, and darkness have no positive existence; and that "there is naught in creation more wondrous than that which already exists."⁵¹

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

... whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most great Light. Methinks, but for the potency of

51 A statement attributed to Hermes and quoted in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 46:2.

that revelation, no being could ever exist. How resplendent the luminaries of knowledge that shine in an atom, and how vast the oceans of wisdom that surge within a drop! (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 71–72)

He further states that

. . . all things are the recipients and revealers of the splendors of that ideal King, and that the signs of the revelation of that Sun, the Source of all splendor, exist and are manifest in the mirrors of beings. Nay, were man to gaze with the eye of divine and spiritual discernment, he will readily recognize that nothing whatsoever can exist without the revelation of the splendor of God, the ideal King. Consider how all created things eloquently testify to the revelation of that inner Light within them. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99)

He also writes:

How all-encompassing are the wonders of His boundless grace! Behold how they have pervaded the whole of creation. Such is their virtue that not a single atom in the entire universe can be found which doth not declare the evidences of His might, which doth not glorify His holy Name, or is not expressive of the effulgent light of His unity (*Gleanings* 26:3).

He also asserts: “all things have ever been and will forever be the repositories of the names of God and the treasuries of the mysteries of His handiwork. In every cycle, He maketh manifest from each being that which He willeth and taketh away therefrom that which He desireth” (Lawḥ-i-Sarráj, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:36, provisional translation). He further states: “in one sense, all things are the signs of God, were ye to ponder over the signs of God in the creation. ‘How many a sign in the heavens and on the earth, upon which they pass, turning aside from it.’⁵² The signs of God are apparent in all created things” (*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 35, provisional translation). He also writes:

In every creature of God's creatures, whether of the loftiest or the lowliest of stations—and this loftiness and lowliness are mentioned in relation to the creation—upon all, every name and every attribute is applicable, so long as they are established beneath the shadow of the True One. Otherwise, they are not regarded as possessing any existence, much less any lofty station. (*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 35, provisional translation)

RECOGNIZING GOD THROUGH HIS CREATION

It is in this way, in this form, and for this reason that one can recognize God. Although one can never know God, as

He is, in the invisible realm, yet His knowledge is possible in the sense that all things emanate from Him and He has revealed Himself in all beings through this emanational procession. God, as He is in His Essence, has no names or attributes. But every created thing, owing to its very existence, in its limited sense, meaning, and form, testifies to an attribute of God or to one of His most excellent names. God is the Invisible, the Inaccessible, and the Unknowable. As previously stated, the Invisible cannot be known, for if it is known, it can no longer be called the Invisible. The creation, conversely, is in the visible realm and can be known.

What is the creation? It is that which exists. What is the source of this existence? It is the outpouring of grace emanating from God. To know a created thing is, therefore, to find a path to the outpouring emanating from God—to recognize the Invisible in His visible manifestation. This is where God should be sought and found, not in His own Self, which is nameless and placeless. It is in this way that one can make a connection between one's knowledge and God's existence and call it the recognition of God. Otherwise, the Essence of God is nondelimited—namely, free from all association or relationship—and, therefore, unknowable. In short, God cannot be known except through that which is created by Him and visible to us—that which has emanated from His invisible sanctuary and appeared in the visible plane. This is what is meant by the *hadith* “I was a Hidden Treasure. I

wished to be known, therefore I called the creation into being in order to be known”. God would have remained a Hidden Treasure had He not wanted to call the creation into being.

In this sense, God can be found everywhere, seen in everything, and reached through every path. Every created thing sings His praise with its inner tongue, a praise that can be heard throughout the universe with inner ears.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

[A]ll things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. Each according to its capacity, indicateth, and is expressive of, the knowledge of God. So potent and universal is this revelation, that it hath encompassed all things, visible and invisible. Thus hath He revealed: “Hath aught else save Thee a power of revelation which is not possessed by Thee, that it could have manifested Thee? Blind is the eye which doth not perceive Thee.”⁵³ Likewise, hath the eternal King spoken: “No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it.”⁵⁴ Also in the tradition of Kumayl it is written: “Behold, a light hath shone forth out of the Morn of eternity, and lo! its waves have penetrated

53 From a prayer attributed to Imám Husayn for the Day of ‘Arafah. See *Al-Majlisí* 142.

54 A statement attributed to Imám ‘Alí.

the inmost reality of all men.”⁵⁵
(*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 73)

He further writes:

Behold how within all things the portals of the Ridván of God are opened, that seekers may attain the cities of understanding and wisdom, and enter the gardens of knowledge and power. Within every garden they will behold the mystic bride of inner meaning enshrined within the chambers of utterance in the utmost grace and fullest adornment. Most of the verses of the Qur’án indicate, and bear witness to, this spiritual theme. The verse: “Neither is there aught which doth not celebrate His praise”⁵⁶ is eloquent testimony thereto; and “We noted all things and wrote them down”,⁵⁷ a faithful witness thereof. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 99)

He also states:

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. Every created thing will be enabled (so great is this reflecting power) to reveal the potentialities of its preordained station, will recognize its capacity and limitations, and will testify to the truth that “He, verily, is God; there is none other God besides Him.” (*Gleanings* 124:2)

He also asserts:

Wert thou to scale the inaccessible, lofty heights through the stations of trust and detachment and gaze with thine inner eyes, thou wouldst find this utterance⁵⁸ free and detached from the limitations of self and hear the words “He hath known God who hath known anything” with thine inner ears from the voice of the mystic Dove of holiness. For the sign of the revelation of the All-Abiding and the splendors of the manifestation of the Sun of oneness are clearly evident in all things and this is not confined to any one soul. Verily this is undoubtedly the truth,

58 By “this utterance” is meant the *ḥadīth*, “He hath known God who hath known himself,” as mentioned earlier in this Tablet. See *Majmú‘iy-i-Álváh* 351 for the original-language Tablet.

55 A statement attributed to Imám ‘Alí.

56 Qur’án 17:44.

57 Qur’án 78:29.

could ye but understand. (*Majmú'iy-i-Alváh* 353, provisional translation)

He further states: “every man may testify, in himself and by himself, before the Seat of the revelation of his Lord, that there is none other God but Him; and that all may reach that summit of realities where none shall contemplate anything but that he shall perceive God therein” (*Call* 2:1). He also writes: “For naught doth he behold save that he perceiveth God therein. He beholdeth the effulgent glories of God in the lights of His Revelation that have encompassed the Sinai of creation” (*Gems* ¶84). He also states: “Everything is the remembrance of God in all creation, for every created thing is, in its essence, the name of God, and His name, exalted be His glory, is His remembrance amongst men. It hath ever been thus and it will forever remain so” (*Lawḥ-i-Sarráj*, in *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:62, provisional translation). He further asserts:

All things, insofar as they are related to the One True God, utter the call: “Verily, I am God; there is none other God besides me.” It is indubitably clear that this word and this station are not from that being itself, but for the reason that it hath entered beneath the shadow of the True One and hath been accounted of God. Should that relation be severed, that same being will be numbered with the inmates of hell in the sight of God.

(*Kitáb-i-Badí'* 36–37, provisional translation)

In the following passage from one of His Tablets, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborates on the above excerpts from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and stresses that the utmost extent to which human understanding can know God is reached through reflecting upon the world of creation, particularly in creatures that reflect the effusion of God’s outpourings to the greatest degree.

The merciful outpourings of that Divine Essence, however, are vouchsafed unto all beings and it is incumbent upon man to ponder in his heart upon the effusions of the Divine Grace, the soul being counted as one, rather than upon the Divine Essence itself. This is the utmost limit for human understanding. As it hath previously been mentioned, these 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. When we say that the Divine Essence understandeth and is free, we do not mean that we have discovered the Divine Will and Purpose, but rather that we have acquired knowledge of them through the Divine Grace revealed and manifested in the realities of things. (“Tablet”)

DIFFERENCE IN DEGREES
OF REVELATION

It was previously mentioned that the created things occupy various stations on the continuum of existence and, as such, reflect various degrees of the divine revelation. This results in different degrees of nearness and remoteness in relation to the Source of revelation.⁵⁹

Each being, therefore, occupies a unique position by measure of the relative perfection it possesses and lies nearer to or further from the absolute perfection that is the world of God. Every created being, then, testifies to the existence of God commensurate with its rank: creatures that enjoy a greater perfection—that reflect the existence and the divine revelation more intensely—paint a fuller picture of the existence of God. Through them and in them God can be found more easily. For example, the sun shines upon the stone, water, and mirror, but the intensity of its reflection in them varies commensurate with their differing degrees. Therefore, if the sun could not be seen, it would be known better through its reflection in the mirror than in the stone.

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

[T]he reality of Divinity . . . has bestowed its bounties upon all kingdoms of the phenomenal

world, and evidences of spiritual manifestation are witnessed throughout the realms of contingent existence. The lights of God illumine the world of man, even as the effulgences of the sun shine gloriously upon the material creation. The Sun of Reality is one; its bestowal is one; its heat is one; its rays are one; it shines upon all the phenomenal world, but the capacity for comprehending it differs according to the kingdoms, each kingdom receiving the light and bounty of the eternal Sun according to its capacity. The black stone receives the light of the material sun; the trees and animals likewise are recipients of it. All exist and are developed by that one bounty. (*Promulgation* 62:3)

He also writes:

Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun’s rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.

Shouldst thou, however, turn thy gaze unto a Mirror, brilliant, stainless, and pure, wherein the divine Beauty is reflected, therein wilt thou find the Sun shining with Its rays, Its heat, Its disc, Its fair form all entire. For each separate entity possesseth its allotted portion of the solar light and telleth of the Sun. . . . (*Selections* 19:9–10)

59 Refer to “Proximity and Remoteness” in this essay for a discussion of the true meaning of these terms and their relation to the transcendence of God above time, place, relationship, and direction.

MAN IS THE NOBLEST
OF ALL CREATED THINGS

In this hierarchy, human existence possesses the highest degree of perfection. This is an indisputable fact, because the human reality embodies all the degrees of existence. One aspect of human existence, like the mineral, is physical: it has spatial extension, duration, weight, mass, shape, dimension, inertia, color, smell, taste, heat, motion, and other similar properties. Another aspect of his existence, like the vegetable, manifests signs of life, such as consumption of food, respiration, growth, reproduction, birth, and death. Yet another aspect of his existence, like the animal, is the source of sense perception, cognitive ability, and voluntary movement—albeit in the limited sense of natural reaction not originating in rational choice, in the case of the animal.

In addition to all these properties and attributes, the human existence has a special human aspect that other creatures do not have. Human beings comprehend universal principles and deduce the unknown from the known. They subdue nature. They have intellect, understanding, and reason. They possess the power of speech, which enables them to translate abstract concepts into words and sentences, and to compose and analyze them. They have moral conscience and choice and, as a result, feel responsible for their words and actions. They are cognizant of the passage of time, revive the past in the present, and connect the present to the

future. They have belief and faith. They consider themselves to be capable of change, renewal, progress, and refinement, and leave for posterity the fruits of their efforts in transforming or advancing their lives, through education. Their talents express their attraction to beauty and produce fine arts. Their intellect manifests their love for the truth and generates sciences and arts. Their conscience displays their desire for good and drives virtuous deeds. Their faith is in the Transcendent Perfection that is beyond nature. To express in a single term what all these privileges and distinctions describe, we state that they have rational soul, or human spirit.

Some, like materialists and natural scientists, might disagree with this assertion, which requires one to accept the natural distinction of the human race. They may argue, for example, that all these properties are extensions of those in the mineral, vegetable, and animal worlds, or that they represent the current stage in the essential process of the evolution of matter. Be that as it may, this essay does not engage in this discussion, but presents the theological tenets of the Bahá'í view of God and revelation. Even materialists cannot deny the fact that at the present time, man is the noblest and most perfect of all created things, even if they consider this to be the result of a gradual evolution of animal life.

The following passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh state that the human existence ranks the highest in the levels of perfection and is the recipient of the most intense degree of

the effusions of existence in the emanational procession:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation—even as is recorded and evident in the holy tradition.⁶⁰ He favored man with the bounteous robe of “We, verily, created man in the most excellent form”⁶¹ and honored him with the glorious mantle of “Hallowed be the Lord, the most excellent of all creators!”^{62,63}

Man, the noblest and most perfect of all created things, excelleth them all in the intensity of this revelation, and is a fuller expression of its glory. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 73)

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Each creature is the recipient of some portion of that power, and man, who contains the perfection of the mineral, the

vegetable and animal, as well as his own distinctive qualities, has become the noblest of created beings. Therefore, he encompasses all created things, ... especially the perfect man.”⁶⁴ He further says:

Man possesses all the perfections of the world of creation: the mineral body, the vegetable tenderness, and the animal senses. In addition, he is the recipient of the perfections of the divine bounties. There can be no doubt that he is the noblest of all created things. His powers encompass the realities of existence and discover the mysteries of the universe. He unveils their attributes and the secrets concealed within them, draws them from the invisible to the visible plane, and offers them for the benefit of the minds and intellects. (*Khiṭábát* 1:6, provisional translation)

He also states:

There is no doubt then, that of all created beings man is the nearest to the nature of God, and therefore receives a greater gift of the Divine Bounty.

The mineral kingdom possesses the power of existing. The plant has the power of existing and

60 This is a reference to the Islamic tradition “I was a hidden Treasure.”

61 Qur’án 95:4.

62 Qur’án 23:14.

63 Provisional translation of an excerpt from an Arabic-Persian Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh, published in *Majmú‘iy-i-Álváh* 339. The first sentence can also be found in *Gleanings* 27:2.

64 Provisional translation of an excerpt from a talk by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, published in *Khiṭábát* 1:28. The first sentence can also be found in *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 23.

growing. The animal, in addition to existence and growth, has the capacity of moving about, and the use of the faculties of the senses. In the human kingdom we find all the attributes of the lower worlds, with much more added thereto. Man is the sum of every previous creation, for he contains them all.

To man is given the special gift of the intellect by which he is able to receive a larger share of the light Divine. (*Paris Talks* 5:13–15)

MAN IS THE MANIFESTATION OF THE DIVINE NAMES AND ATTRIBUTES

Because man is the noblest of all created things and is distinguished from all the other creatures, he receives a greater share of the effusion of existence, of God's revelation in the world of creation. As previously stated, all created things manifest some aspects of God's names, attributes, and perfections according to their various degrees and limits of existence. Human beings, however, encompass all created things and possess all their perfections, and therefore manifest all the divine names, attributes, and perfections.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it

a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty. (*Gleanings* 27:2)

He also states:

To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. All these names and attributes are applicable to him. Even as He hath said: "Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery."⁶⁵ Manifold are the verses that have been repeatedly revealed in all the heavenly Books and the holy Scriptures, expressive of this most subtle and lofty theme. Even as He hath revealed: "We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves."⁶⁶ Again He saith: "And also in your own selves: will ye not then behold the signs of God?"⁶⁷ And yet again He revealeth: "And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves."⁶⁸ In this connection, He Who is the eternal

65 Words of Muḥammad.

66 Qur'án 41:53.

67 Qur'án 51:21.

68 Qur'án 59:19.

King—may the souls of all that dwell within the mystic Tabernacle be a sacrifice unto Him—hath spoken: “He hath known God who hath known himself.”⁶⁹ (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 72).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains:

All created things are resplendent signs of God. For instance, the rays of the sun shine upon all earthly things, yet the light that falls upon the plains, the mountains, the trees and fruits is only in such measure as to make them visible, to ensure their growth, and to cause them to attain the object of their existence. The Perfect Man, however, is even as a clear mirror in which the Sun of Truth is revealed and manifested in the fullness of its attributes and perfections. (*Some Answered Questions* 27:5)

He also states:

In the Old Testament we read that God said, “Let us make man in Our own image.” In the Gospel, Christ said, “I am in the Father, and the Father in Me.”⁷⁰ Muḥammad says, “Man is my Mystery and I am his.” Bahá’u’lláh writes that God says, “Thy heart is My home; purify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation.

All these sacred words show us that man is made in God’s image⁷¹

This indicates that while confessing the transcendence of God’s station, sanctifying Him from the comprehension of all, and exalting Him above all regress, incarnation, and descent, the Bahá’í Writings consider the human heart 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 everlasting beauty. It is in this sense that man can find God within himself and witness His beauty by turning to his own self.

Bahá’u’lláh writes: “O Son of Man! The temple of being is My throne; cleanse it of all things, that there I may be established and there I may abide” (Arabic Hidden Words no. 58). He also writes: “O Son of Being! Thy heart is

71 From a talk by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in which He refers to statements from the Writings and utterances of Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad, and Bahá’u’lláh. The early English translation of this talk is published in *Paris Talks* ch. 5. In this talk, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is not directly quoting these Writings and utterances, although in this early translation published in *Paris Talks* ch. 5 they appear in quotation marks. This early translation is not completely accurate, so it has been reproduced here with a minor modification.

69 An Islamic tradition.

70 John 14:11.

My home; sanctify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation” (Arabic Hidden Words no. 59). He further writes: “O Son of Man! Put thy hand into My bosom, that I may rise above thee, radiant and resplendent” (Arabic Hidden Words no. 60). He also states:

God, exalted be His glory and magnified be His loftiness, hath, from time immemorial even unto this day, been sanctified above ascent and descent. Every place that is cleansed from the dust of self and the thistles of passion, however, will be illumined by the light of His effulgence. It behooves everyone to strive with the utmost endeavor to attain unto this transcendent and most sublime station. (Iranian National Bahá'í Archives 18:367, provisional translation)

He also writes: “Praise be unto God Who . . . hath made the hearts of His chosen ones a throne for the establishment of His beauty and a mirror to attest to the glory of His sovereignty” (*Safíniy-i-‘Irfán* 12:12, provisional translation). In the following passage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains this concept further:

The recognition of God is through the evidences of His names and attributes which are the resplendent signs of His Essence and the manifestations of God’s perfections in the realities of things. The reality of man, in the sense

that it is that which it is, is verily a distinguished sign that singeth the praise of his Creator, revealeth the mysteries of his Maker, and expoundeth the evidences of His consummate wisdom enshrined therein. Exalted is He Who created it, fashioned it, and shaped it: “And also in your own selves: will ye not then behold the signs of God?”⁷² . . . This knowledge is to recognize the signs of the Kingdom which are treasured within the realities of the souls and the worlds: “We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves, until it become plain to them that it is the truth”⁷³. . . . Verily, when the dayspring of guidance, ‘Alí—peace be upon him—looked upon the effects, the signs, and the mysteries enshrined within the realities of things, then repeated the gaze and saw not a single flaw, he said: “If the veil were lifted, my certitude would in no wise increase.” (*Makátib-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 1:134–36, provisional translation)

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this essay, we explored God’s sanctity and transcendence at length. In several subsequent occasions, we again elaborated on this key theme in Bahá'í belief in Divine

⁷² Qur’án 51:21, qtd. in Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 72.

⁷³ Qur’án 41:53, qtd. in Bahá’u’lláh, *Call* 2:24.

unity. We finally stressed that the emanation of beings from God and His revelation in them is vastly different from incarnation, anthropomorphism, appearance, and descent.

Nevertheless, at the conclusion of this essay we cite again several passages from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. This, we hope, would assist the readers to rest assured that God has decreed that belief in His sanctity and transcendence be a focal point of the teachings in this Dispensation, that no uncertainty or misunderstanding would lead to a belief in God's incarnation or in His immanence and descent in the contingent world.

Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Let no one imagine that by Our assertion that all created things are the signs of the revelation of God is meant that—God forbid—all men, be they good or evil, pious or infidel, are equal in the sight of God. Nor doth it imply 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!

By the righteousness of My name, the All-Merciful! The Pen of the Most High trembleth with a great trembling and is sore shaken at the revelation of these words. How puny and insignificant is the evanescent drop when compared with the waves and billows of God's limitless and everlasting Ocean, and how utterly contemptible must every contingent and perishable thing appear when brought face to face with the uncreated, the unspeakable glory of the Eternal! We implore pardon of God, the All-Powerful, for them that entertain such beliefs, and give utterance to such words. Say: O people! How can a fleeting fancy compare with the Self-Subsisting, and how can the Creator be likened unto His creatures, who are but as the script of His Pen? Nay, His script excelleth all things, and is sanctified from, and immeasurably exalted above, all creatures. (*Gleanings* 93:7–8)

These passages stress the transcendence of the Essence of God, but also state another fact: that all created beings receive different degrees of the divine revelation and rank differently in their reflection of God's names and attributes; that the highest degree and rank belong to human beings; and that there are different degrees and ranks among human beings as well. Not everyone, simply by virtue of membership in the human race, reflects all of God's attributes, manifests all the divine names, or mirrors forth His transcendent existence. Not everyone is able to attain to this station. That is why, as quoted above, Bahá'u'lláh states: "Let no one imagine that by Our assertion that all created things are the signs of the revelation of God is meant that—God forbid—all men, be they good or evil, pious or infidel, are equal in the sight of God. ... 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."

Only the heart of the perfect man can be the throne of the All-Merciful. Only the noblest soul can find God within. The people of religion believe that the noblest of all human beings are the Manifestations of God. Only They manifest in the highest degree of perfection the effusion of existence emanating from the transcendent Source. Only They reflect God's everlasting

beauty. In the kingdom of Revelation⁷⁴ and the world of creation, where there is no access to the invisible realm of God, He can be found only through His Manifestations, so that no ordinary human being may be overcome with greed, ignore the difference in stations, use the pretext of humanity to claim divinity, and thus sink to degradation: "We, verily, created man in the most excellent form, then caused him to sink into the lowest abyss of degradation" (Qur'án 95:4).

74 "The kingdom of Revelation" refers to the realm of the reality of the Manifestations of God as the intermediary between the world of God and the world of creation. It is referred to as "the realm of divine Revelation" in *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 128 and "the Kingdom of His Cause" in *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶1.

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