

# *The 23rd Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture*

## Unveiling the *Húrí* of Love

JOHN S. HATCHER

### *Abstract*

Most people are acquainted with the major issues that science and religion must resolve in order to reconcile their sometimes mutually exclusive descriptions of reality. As Bahá'ís, we may feel privileged to have been made aware of what we believe to be foundational answers relating to the interplay between these twin expressions of reality. As Bahá'í scholars, however, we are obliged to help discover and forge pathways from the essential questions to those foundational answers, if we are to play a meaningful role in demonstrating how physical and metaphysical aspects of reality can be understood to be “exact counterparts of each other.” This article, taken from my Balyuzi lecture in 2005, attempts to explain a parallel relationship between (1) the means by which the essential unknowable intelligence we call “God” employs the intermediaries of extraordinary beings (Manifestations) to run physical reality, and (2) the means by which the essentially unknowable intelligence we call the human “soul” employs the intermediary of an extraordinary creation (the human brain) to run our physical bodies. The abiding theme of this discourse is to understand how the Creator’s love is the motive force instigating and sustaining these parallel systems.

### *Résumé*

La plupart des gens sont au fait des grandes questions que la science et la religion doivent résoudre pour concilier leurs perceptions parfois diamétralement opposées de la réalité. En tant que bahá'ís, nous pouvons nous sentir privilégiés d'avoir pu prendre conscience de ce que nous considérons comme des réponses fondamentales à ces questions essentielles concernant l'interaction de ces deux

expressions parallèles de la réalité. Toutefois, en tant qu'érudits bahá'ís, nous devons contribuer à faire découvrir les voies qui mèneront à ces réponses fondamentales. Ainsi pourrons-nous jouer un rôle significatif en démontrant de quelle manière les aspects physiques et métaphysiques de la réalité peuvent être perçus comme étant les « contreparties exactes l'une de l'autre ». Le présent article, extrait de la conférence Balyuzi que j'ai donnée en 2005, tente d'établir un parallèle entre, d'une part, la manière dont cette intelligence essentielle et insaisissable que nous appelons « Dieu » agit par l'intermédiaire d'êtres extraordinaires (les Manifestations) pour régir la réalité physique et, d'autre part, la façon dont cette intelligence essentielle et insaisissable que nous appelons « l'âme humaine » agit par l'intermédiaire d'une création extraordinaire (le cerveau humain) pour régir le corps matériel. L'unique objet de ce propos est de comprendre comment l'amour du Créateur constitue la force motrice qui engendre et soutient ces systèmes parallèles.

### *Resumen*

La mayor parte de las personas están al tanto de los principales temas que la ciencia y la religión deberán resolver con el fin de reconciliar sus descripciones de lo que es la realidad, a veces mutuamente exclusivas. Siendo bahá'ís, podemos sentirnos privilegiados de haberse dado a conocer aquello que creemos ser las respuestas fundamentales relacionadas al intercambio entre estas expresiones gemelas de la realidad. Sin embargo, como eruditos bahá'ís, estamos obligados a ayudar a descubrir y forjar senderos entre las preguntas esenciales y aquellas respuestas fundamentales, si hemos de tomar un papel significativo en demostrar cómo los aspectos de la realidad, tanto físicos como metafísicos, puedan verse ser contrapartes exactas, el uno del otro. Este escrito, tomado de mi disertación Balyuzi presentada en 2005, busca explicar una relación paralela entre (1) la forma en que la inteligencia esencialmente inescrutable que llamamos "Dios" se vale de seres extraordinarios (Manifestaciones) como intermediarios que hacen funcionar la realidad física y, (2) el modo en que aquella inteligencia esencialmente insondable, la cual llamamos "el alma" se vale de intermediario de una creación extraordinaria, el cerebro humano, para hacer funcionar a nuestros cuerpos físicos. El tema que permanece en este discurso es el de comprender como el amor del Creador es la fuerza motiva que promueve y sostiene estos sistemas paralelos.

“He works his work, I mine,” says Ulysses about his son Telemachus, as he informs the people of Ithaca that he is about to take off on one final adventure, leaving the young man to rule in his stead.

As Bahá’ís, we must remind ourselves almost daily that not everyone can do everything, but everyone can do something. So if my work has been of service, I am pleased, but all the while I am keenly aware that the true heroes and heroines in this period of the Bahá’í Faith are, more often than not, those who labor in selfless obscurity.

Meanwhile, we who are engaged in Bahá’í scholarship become ever more aware of the strategic questions that science and religion must resolve if these two forces for learning and social advancement are to become reconciled in their sometimes mutually exclusive descriptions of reality: questions about the origin of creation, the existence of metaphysical reality; the related questions concerning the interplay between physical and metaphysical aspects of reality; as well as questions about academically, socially, and morally charged issues, such as when human life begins, when it ends, what dynamic force impels human history, and whether or not human consciousness exists independently of the human brain.

If we are Bahá’í scholars, we may feel privileged that we have access to what we believe to be foundational answers to many of the essential questions about the physical and metaphysical aspects of reality, as well as the interplay between them. However, I feel we must always be acutely aware that without focused reflection and intensive study, these same answers, even if correct, can, if wielded mindlessly, render us opinionated, dogmatic, and obnoxious, instead of useful scholars, able to help reconcile these sometimes diametrically opposed views.

Consequently, if we are to assist in facilitating this discourse, rather than in becoming enmeshed and embroiled within it, our task must ever be to discover and forge pathways leading from strategic questions to what we believe to be strategic answers set forth in the authoritative Bahá’í texts.

It is precisely in this vein that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states in one of His own responses to such a question: “Although . . . the answer is short, by close

reflection it shall be made long" (*Tablets of 'Abdul-Bahá* 2: 309). I infer from this comment that while His brief answer may have enabled us to discern the end in the beginning, we are no less obliged to construct bridges from the strategic question to the strategic answer, so that all may have access to the truth about reality by traversing these bridges across the gaps that presently exist.

The observation that perhaps best establishes the potential advantage we possess as scholars capable of employing the vast ocean of information available to us in the Bahá'í texts—as well as the inherent difficulty we have employing that information appropriately—is stated by Shoghi Effendi when he observes: "There is an answer in the teachings for everything; unfortunately the majority of the Bahá'ís, however intensely devoted and sincere they may be, lack for the most part the necessary scholarship and wisdom to reply to and refute the claims and attacks of people with some education and standing" (in *Compilation on Scholarship* 10).

During the course of the last forty-two years as a university professor and publishing scholar, I have devoted a good deal of time to reflecting on a question that I feel is central to the present discourse and disaffection between scientific thought and religious/philosophical thought: If we presume that there is a Creator, why did He decide to give a physical dimension to His creation? Or, stated in more personal terms, if the creation of human beings is at the heart of the purpose of physical creation—as most religions suppose—then why did the Creator presume we would benefit from waking up in an environment where we think we are physical beings, when we really aren't; where we think we own stuff, when we don't; and where we seem to be constantly worried about dying, when our conscious self together with all our essential human powers will endure forever as properties of our eternal soul?

#### THE JOURNEY SO FAR

My first attempt to get to the heart of this question was entitled *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*, in which I discussed the premise that physical reality is a poetic or metaphorical expression of abstract

virtues and, as such, provides a foundational methodology for human beings to become introduced to spiritual reality. In this work, I applied terms and techniques of literary studies of how metaphor works to demonstrate that analogical processes provide a useful means by which ephemeral or metaphysical realities can be introduced to and acquired by the human mind. This study further asserts that it is possible and useful to approach the entire physical part of our lives as a dramatic teaching device.

My next study of this subject, *The Purpose of Physical Reality: The Kingdom of Names*, dealt with the way in which physical reality and our experience in it might correctly be described as a classroom in which we are prepared for the continuation of personal development after the dissociation of our selves (our soul with all its complement of powers and faculties) from our physical body. This work concludes by observing that one of the really useful devices this classroom offers us as preparation for this transition—we might think of it as a workshop or “breakout” session—is aging, an ingeniously devised experience in which we watch our skin become wrinkled, feel our joints falter, our organs failing, and the whole organic physical construct become incrementally more dysfunctional until it dies, decomposes, and, according to Walt Whitman, becomes “leaves of grass,” or, in my own case, a dandelion.

The next stage in my study of physical reality as an expression of a coherent and logically structured expression of a divine plan for human education was called *The Arc of Ascent: The Purpose of Physical Reality II*. The central thesis of this study is that individual spiritual development in the context of the physical classroom is inextricably linked to our reality as inherently social beings. In this work, I conclude that all individual virtue is largely theoretical until practiced and developed in the context of human relationships. For example, a hermit dwelling in a mountain cave may consider himself to be extremely mystical and spiritual, completely kind and selfless, but neither he nor we can be sure he has acquired such virtues unless and until he emerges from his seclusion to help somebody, not once, but enough times that his theoretical virtues become habituated and thus integral attributes of his character.

The thesis of this lecture was taken from ideas developed in my third assault on this endlessly fascinating question, entitled *Close Connections: The Bridge between Spiritual and Physical Reality*. As the title implies, this lengthy and complex discourse analyzes how the gap between the metaphysical and physical aspects of reality is bridged constantly and bidirectionally on both the cosmic and the individual level. Stated axiomatically this work compares the theory that an essentially unknowable metaphysical being (the Creator) runs physical reality, with the parallel theory that an essentially knowable metaphysical being (the human soul) operates the human body. God employs the Manifestations as intermediaries between Himself and physical reality even as we employ our brains as intermediaries between our “essential self” and our bodies.

If this thesis is correct, even as you at this moment read this paper, you and I are conversing soul-to-soul by means of a series of intermediaries. The written expression of ideas emanated from my conscious mind through the intermediary of my brain. It was then published in the *Journal*, and is at this moment being translated by your senses into abstract concepts through the capacity of your brain, which then translates the complex of symbols that constitute human language into meaning. Your conscious mind then considers these ideas, stores them in the repository of your memory, or else rejects them as unworthy of being retained.

The methodology and challenge of this study is first to defend these theories in the light, and with the support of, classical and contemporary scientific theories of reality. Or, put in terms that contemporary physics might find appealing: how can we defend the thesis that essentially metaphysical beings—and therefore, for the majority of contemporary scientists, nonexistent beings—think themselves capable of operating heavy machinery without hurting anybody?

In *Close Connections* I discuss critical questions related to evolution, particle physics, astrophysics, history, cosmology, anthropology, medicine, physiology, psychiatry, and all sorts of other fields directly affected by the assertions that metaphysical reality exists and, more important, that there is a strategic and systematic interplay between the metaphysical

and physical aspects of reality. Most important in this study is the consideration that these relationships are at the heart of any understanding about how reality works at every level of existence.

My overall objective in *Close Connections* is, thus, to demonstrate an integrative view of reality provided in and corroborated by authoritative Bahá'í texts. But since I cannot in a single presentation discuss all the support for a thesis wrought over ten years and several hundred pages of research, I have decided to focus this presentation on one of the fundamental themes in this study: the relationship between the religious axiom that the human purpose is to love God, and the decision of the Creator to make the method by which we can attain this love relationship subtle, indirect, initially physical, poetic, and, consequently, largely hidden and concealed from intuitive knowledge—unless, of course, we are first led out of the cave of ignorance by mentors, and set on the path of willed, self-sustained progress, a process that translates well the Latin verb *educare* (to lead out) into the English cognate “to educate.” Coupled with this concept is another equally enigmatic verb, which evokes the title of this presentation, the concept of love. Since, according to Bahá'í teachings, the human purpose is to learn to know and to worship God, or to love and to express that love in dramatic form, then it is crucial that we understand how both processes work, as neither learning nor loving can be coerced, even by God.

### THE HÚRÍ OF LOVE

Let us begin this process of unveiling the *húrí* of love by first explaining my personal understanding of what a *húrí* is, because my understanding may not accord with other definitions which interpret this symbolic term literally, as an allusion to a company of chaste maidens. I have taken my definition from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* of Bahá'u'lláh, an appropriate source, since the first 116 pages of this work are devoted to unveiling the previously veiled verses of Matthew (24:29–31), a symbolic prophecy about the signs of the coming of the Son of Man. Bahá'u'lláh explicates this as an allusion to the advent of Muhammad: “How many the *húrís* of inner

meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom! None hath yet approached them;—*húrís*, ‘whom no man nor spirit hath touched before’” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 70–71).

Thus, if we thus define *húrí* (literally “white one” or “pure one”) as veiled or hidden or concealed meaning, then we realize that the capacity to understand the poetic verses of scripture—what Bahá’u’lláh alludes to in another passage as “Brides of inner meaning” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 175)—then we can imagine that there are an infinite number of *húrís* about love waiting to be unveiled. But the focus of my concern is how the gap between the metaphysical and physical aspects of reality are bridged on both the macrocosmic and microcosmic levels, so that an authentic love relationship can take place between God and humankind.

We begin the process of unveiling this love relationship by approaching one of the most succinct statements of this relationship that can be discovered: the *hadíth* of the Hidden Treasure, a verse explicated at length by both ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’u’lláh: “I was a Hidden Treasure. I wished to be made known, and thus I called creation into being in order that I might be known” (qtd. in Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 175). Implicit in this *hadíth* is not merely a casual acknowledgement of the Creator, but sufficient knowledge that we choose to participate in a love relationship with the Creator. Thus, if the Creator merely wished to be recognized as an extant being of omnipotence, He could simply reveal Himself in some spectacular fashion, so that no one could possibly deny His existence or His heretofore hidden treasures. He could simply utter, “*Kun fa Yakúnu*” (“Be! and it is”) and we would instantly exist and would instantly acknowledge His supremacy and power—the way Job does when God speaks to him from the whirlwind. We would all become instantly transformed, like little Billy Batson who, by simply uttering *Shazam!* is transformed into Captain Marvel.

But here we are 5.9 billion years into the evolution of this one planet, and so far we have not even accomplished the fruition of the Lesser Peace. Bahá’u’lláh clearly acknowledges that the Creator has the power to make this a reality very simply with a single word:

Within the treasury of Our Wisdom there lieth unrevealed a



knowledge, one word of which, if we chose to divulge it to mankind, would cause every human being to recognize the Manifestation of God and to acknowledge His omniscience, would enable every one to discover the secrets of all the sciences, and to attain so high a station as to find himself wholly independent of all past and future learning. (*Summons 35*)

Indeed, an instantaneous and direct process is precisely what creationists theorize occurred. Six thousand years ago, God created a man and a woman and thus the earth became populated and human history began. Ironically, in spite of the ostensible warfare between science and religion, most astrophysicists are in accord with this perception of creation as having a point of beginning in time, only with a slight increase in time: from six thousand years to sixteen billion years. For while astrophysicists posit many theories about whether or not the big bang caused the beginning of time, and some believe the beginning of space as well, few agree as to what caused this event, since they believe that nothing preceded it. It's a mystery, a *húri*.

Let me give you a couple of examples of the strange alliances we now find, and the strange corners thinkers of every sort have thought themselves into. The fact is that scientific study—indeed virtually all academic study—is now so segregated into discrete and often isolated areas that larger questions are treated more as a nuisance, as a source of bemusement to share on a coffee break than as issues of critical concern.

A recent personal experience may demonstrate my point. A few weeks ago I went to the lecture by 2004 Nobel Prize-winning physicist and MIT professor Frank Wilczek, in which he spoke about his exquisite work in quantum chromodynamics. During the course of his presentation, Wilczek displayed a photograph of two particles crashing into each other at the CERN accelerator in Geneva. He then observed that this image might well resemble what the big bang looked like.

Having completed my book only the week before, and having posited and proved to my personal satisfaction the “big bang” theory to be logically untenable, even ludicrous, I asked during the Q and A that followed

that, if it required immense energy and planning to get these two particles to crash into each other to produce this effect, why would there not be the same sort of sufficient cause for a big bang—which would thus make the big bang an effect rather than a sufficient cause for physical reality and, according to Hawking, for the beginning of time itself—and, according to some theorists, the beginning of space itself. After all, if space already existed, then didn't something precede the big bang?

His answer was a sort of gestalt sidestep, an anecdote about Napoleon who, upon perusing Laplace's great work, *Mécanique Céleste*, commented, "It appears to me that there is no mention of God in your system of the universe." Laplace laughed, slapped the emperor on the back and replied, "You tiny emperor person you, I had no need of that hypothesis to complete my work." Wilczek did not mention the slap on the back in his story, but according to some observers, Laplace emerged from this historic encounter with a pained grimace—as if he had been struck very hard.

This story was Professor Wilczek's way of explaining that he did not particularly care whether or not something preceded the big bang, because that theory had nothing to do with his own remarkable ability to create a formula for predicting where particulates would end up after splitting a quark into the constituent components of a quark, an anti-quark, and a "gluon"—physicists being, by nature, very poetic. Indeed, Wilczek gave much the same answer to someone who asked about superstring theory.

This attitude or perspective—that scientists can work in isolation on discrete parts of reality, even as medical specialists work on ever more indiscrete parts of our bodies, often without having the slightest idea whether or not they have made us healthier as an entire human being—is the precise opposite of what advocates of religion or philosophical students of reality desire to accomplish. Indeed, this anecdote underscores what my brother William S. Hatcher observed in his work *Minimalism*—namely, that science possesses (or thinks it possesses) very exact knowledge about very discrete portions of reality (which it thus studies as a modular system), whereas philosophy and religion possess (or think they possess) very inexact knowledge about the entirety of reality (which they study as a holographic system). Stated even more succinctly, science offers a bottom-

up view of reality, while philosophy and religion offer a top-down view. My objective is to offer a synthesized or integrative view of these ostensibly opposing but potentially complementary approaches to reality.

So what would be wrong with this cosmogonist myth of instant creation, whether from a fundamentalist creationist perspective, or from a scientific theory of a big bang? We would be created already in love with God, all spiritual and smiling at one another with happy families living in nice neighborhoods! There would be no backbiting, no war, and all TV shows about crime scene investigation would be entirely fictional. We would all eat organic food, have pure water and clean air.

The problem is that, besides being bored, we would exist like amnesiacs waking into a reality without a conscious history, without the foggiest idea of how we became so nice, and certainly without any sense of having participated in this event. Consequently, we would not only be unable to appreciate the value of what we had, since, having known nothing else, we would be totally at a loss as to how to proceed beyond this point, because we would have no experience or training to provide us with the tools necessary for further development.

If we return to the desire of the Creator not merely to be known, but to create a being capable of a love relationship, we realize that an instantaneous creation does not work, and for a number of reasons. First, authentic love requires a number of essential conditions which an instantaneous act could not provide. But before we examine the properties of such a love relationship, let us briefly examine the love relationship as it is commonly perceived, so that we can then see that the methodology employed by the Creator is not only useful, but essential.

#### A MODERN AFFLICTION: THE NEUROTIC CONCEPT OF LOVE

The world has now become largely afflicted with the Western view of love as an event, in much the same way that most scholars view creation as an event. Furthermore, we have come to view love as an event that we are powerless to control. Love happens to us—like a traffic accident, only worse, because there is no insurance coverage for it.

Even more unfortunate is the fact that we are taught to desire this accident, even to long for it. Thus we place ourselves in the most likely places to have it strike us down. Metaphorically, we stand in the middle of a three-lane superhighway and close our eyes. It matters not whether such an event is appropriate to our lives—whether or not we are married or single, already in a relationship or not—because we are constantly and ceaselessly bombarded by the message that meaningful life can be brought about by nothing else except the ecstasy of the bloom of new love.

But the cruelest part of this neurotic vision is that once we are struck down by the SUV of love, this intense desire and infatuation cannot, must not *ever* change. But if it does, it is not our fault. After all, love is not an act of free will. We simply fell *out* of love. The SUV struck us and then drove off—what we might call a hit-and-run love affair. And while from any sort of rational or objective perspective, this sort of relationship sounds more like the title of a poorly written country-and-western song, this is, in fact, what we think as a global society, and why we are liable to excuse any act performed while one is in the throes of passion, whether it be murder or simply abandoning one's husband or wife or children to pursue this central objective. That, we are constantly reminded, is the one event worth living for.

Furthermore, if we would rather sustain this feeling than destroy our family, we will try just about any product to maintain the initial sensation we once had, including a plethora of multicolored pills, artistically crafted undergarments, and all manner of methodologies to rid ourselves of unsightly human hair or to acquire thoroughly exfoliated skin that retains the texture we had when we were sixteen.

Naturally, all of this effort, however sincerely and rigorously pursued, must ultimately give way to nature itself—the inexorable and apparently intractable process of aging and, in time, death, Nature's way of exhorting us to give up this struggle to stay forever young. It is then—or, with those who have attained some slight degree of wisdom, slightly before then—that we come to realize that all the myths about love with which we have been raised, trained, and indoctrinated, are unhealthy, unnatural, and impossible. We realize this verity partially because, as students of

nature, we in time appreciate that nothing in physical or metaphysical reality can exist in a condition of stasis. Nor should we desire stasis, especially in relationships, because stasis is agonizingly boring and, therefore, doomed.

Nevertheless, Western society has inherited the mythical belief that love can and should always be the same, a concept which really defines love as an event more than a process. And thus, we seem to be comfortable treating love as an event, a mysterious accident that evokes incredible psychic and physical sensations. Furthermore, because we accept this event as an accident and thus quite beyond free will, we also conclude that this event is all the more enticing because it transports us out of the realm of responsibility and accountability. “Sorry, honey,” our spouse is liable to say one evening at dinner, “but I have to leave you and the kids because today at work I was struck by the SUV of love.”

Of course, your lawyers will work out the details of the practical repercussions of the accident—who gets what furniture and which child—but you can hardly argue against an accident any more than you can argue against a tornado or a flat tire. The SUV of your love just up and drove away, and another Escalade in midnight blue came and struck your spouse at lunch.

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE MYTH

Interestingly, there is a great deal of fascinating scholarship about this neurotic paradigm of love as it has evolved in Western literature and culture. My favorite is *Love in the Western World* by Denis de Rougement, who employs a study of the medieval romance as a paradigm for understanding and explaining our contemporary views and beliefs about love, as well as the *húri* veiled within these beliefs.

According to de Rougement, our modern view of love takes its origin from the medieval romance idea that love thrives only when it is forbidden, or else when its progress is being hindered by insurmountable obstacles, the most frequent one being that the fair maiden is already married to the liege lord of the knight with whom she has fallen helplessly in love.

Thus, an obstacle of some sort is essential if the love is to intensify and remain just out of reach—and in a tenuous condition of stasis because it is beyond any final resolution or union.

This is not to say it is beyond consummation, that it is a Platonic relationship as is commonly thought. This is a confusion with Petrarchan love, in which the lover pines for his beloved from a distance, idealizes her, and writes sonnets about her. The only sense in which courtly love is Platonic is that the ecstasy and mystical elements of the intense experience might be thought of as transformative, and can lead to an appreciation of a higher form of love, such as that which Plato describes in the *Symposium*, or that which Guinevere achieves at the end of Malory's treatment of the Arthurian legend.

For the most part, however, the courtly love tradition is thoroughly sensual and sexual, with each rendezvous more daring and more intense than the last. It is love from a distance only in the sense that the lovers constantly lament that they are unable to have an unencumbered, long-term, uninterrupted relationship. Of course, what they do not realize—but what de Rougement does—is that the removal of obstacles and the ability to be together daily would quickly destroy the whole shebang. The routine would remove the risk, the intensity, the passion, longing, and the intermittent ecstasy. They would be stuck with each other all the time and have to worry about earning a living, raising children, cleaning his armor, cooking, taking the kids to sword practice. In time, they would try to find something more passionate on the side:

The myth of falling in love operates wherever passion is dreamed of as an ideal instead of being feared like a malignant fever; imagined as a magnificent and desirable disaster instead of as simply a disaster. It lives upon the lives of people who think that love is their fate (and as unavoidable as the effect of the love-potion in the Romance); that it swoops upon powerless and ravished men and women in order to consume them in a pure flame; or that it is stronger and more real than happiness, society, or morality. (de Rougement 24)

To his great credit, de Rougement does sense that underlying this

neurotic myth of ecstatic longing is a concealed longing for the ultimate transformative experience, death itself, the ultimate ecstatic experience. He also concludes that it is this desire that explains the progress and outcome of all courtly romances—whether Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, Lancelot and Guinevere, Tristan and Isolde, or Romeo and Juliet.

They all end in one of three ways: they can end “happily ever after,” in which case in our minds they stay forever young, never have children, mortgages, car repairs, or hip replacements. Indeed, the story must immediately stop with their reunion, because otherwise it would go downhill very quickly, SUV-wise. Consequently, all love stories that have the happy ending focus on the intensity and complexity of obstacles that must be overcome for the two to get together. Furthermore, the story must ignore all damage that has been done along the way—the post-traumatic shock syndrome that both must necessarily have as a result of having endured countless episodes of tragic experiences. In effect, the ending not only eradicates all obstacles for the love relationship, but we can assume that it also magically cures all emotional scars in the fictional romance that would otherwise complicate a real relationship.

More realistic is the second paradigm often used in the satiric or comic version of this concept in action: the lovers fall out of love by falling in love with someone else in order to experience once again the same ecstatic experience of new love. This is the universal love cycle I term the Seinfeld syndrome, a process in which the lover’s life consists of an endless sequence of episodic relationships, all of which hold out the hope of being the “right” one, but none of which ever seem to be exactly what the lover needs. This sort of eternal adolescence so acceptable in contemporary television sitcoms, is not quite so hilarious for the aging lover or his or her victims left behind, once reconstructive surgeries and innovative chemical assistance no longer function adequately to sustain the inevitable decline in the physical capacity to maintain this neurotic and doomed quest for the perfect fit.

The third possible ending is the tragic conclusion that befits better de Rougement’s thesis that this passion is really concealing an ecstatic longing for the ultimate transformative experience of death itself. Or from a Bahá’í perspective, as derived from Middle Eastern poetic imagery (from

which, by the way, the entire courtly love tradition ultimately derives), a longing for union or reunion with the "Friend" or the "Beloved." In this paradigm, things almost work out, but get messed up just in time for the lovers to die or kill themselves, as most forthrightly portrayed in *Tristan and Isolde* or *Romeo and Juliet*.

The paradigm goes something like this. First there is love at first sight, not simply because the lovers are too shallow to be attracted to aught beside physical appearance.

But as fate would have it—and in the romance Fate will have it—she is as witty and charming as she is beautiful and, with the appropriate obstacle in place (the family feud), the star-crossed lovers are appropriately doomed. Of course, we excuse the young lovers because they are young, because they are lovers, and people can't help falling in love. And we forgive Tristan and Isolde because they have taken a love potion which, in addition to the addictive properties of love, means that they are operating outside the laws of free will and thus understandably feel no guilt. And we understandably sympathize with all their shenanigans, as they have successive rendezvous and make a complete fool of King Mark, even as do Lancelot and Guinevere.

In any case, all the lovers in this paradigm kill themselves, and somehow we are supposed to think this is very exciting and touching. We are even supposed to envy them these intense relationships, which, while usually adulterous and entirely physical, come to epitomize what we ourselves are supposed to discover (only without the death part).

Yet this third category, these unhappy endings, are the romances that endure and tantalize us. We can cheer when Rhett Butler walks out the door after finally realizing what a wretched and selfish woman he has fallen in love with, but we regret that they couldn't quite get it together. Few and far between are those love stories where the couple endure hardships, only to find their relationship strengthened, as each learns to assist the other in fashioning a mature and enduring bond, having raised healthy and happy children, and having no regrets about their decision to take willful control of their lives and the progression of their relationship.



## AUTHENTIC LOVE VS. SOCIAL NORMS

In spite of the fact that our culture still accepts and endorses the concept of love as an event, an accident, a thing quite beyond our willful control, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that none of the three paradigms we have just described can be defined as love—at least not as far as they go, which is about six to ten months, according to the newly calibrated Hollywood adjustable sliding scale. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

But the love which sometimes exists between friends is not (true) love, because it is subject to transmutation; this is merely fascination. As the breeze blows, the slender trees yield. If the wind is in the East the tree leans to the West, and if the wind turns to the West the tree leans to the East. This kind of love is originated by the accidental conditions of life. This is not love, it is merely acquaintanceship; it is subject to change.

Today you will see two souls apparently in close friendship; tomorrow all this may be changed. Yesterday they were ready to die for one another, today they shun one another’s society! This is not love; it is the yielding of the hearts to the accidents of life. When that which has caused this ‘love’ to exist passes, the love passes also; this is not in reality love. (*Paris Talks* 181)

So what, then, is the distinction between what is commonly accepted as love and the authentic love alluded to in the Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh in which He portrays what God feels for us and what He desires that we feel for Him in return? Or, stated in terms of the Seven Valleys, if this powerful attraction which follows on the heels of intensive and dedicated search is a valid part of an organic process, what can and should follow this initial stage that we seem to have mistaken for the entire experience?

Socrates portrays this process in the *Symposium* in terms of the metaphor of a ladder of love. For while the concept of “Platonic love” has come to connote a relationship that is nonphysical, the process begins with physical attraction or infatuation and proceeds by degrees through

graduated stages (rungs on the ladder) of refinement or ascent. Thus, Platonic love portrays this blinding magnetic attraction as one of the first stages in a sequence of an ever more refined relationship, rather than as the end or objective of love itself.

This graduated sequence, which became the basis for most mystical treatises in both Christianity and Islam, is similar to the process portrayed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Seven Valleys. Here, too, love as intense attraction is not disdained, nor is it perceived as inappropriate. This intense ardor and longing and passion may be the initial stage of authentic love, but only if it leads the lover to other succeeding stages of progress and development. Otherwise, the intensity and blind attraction has no meaning in and of itself.

Thus, the succeeding stage of this process consists of extricating oneself from this blind infatuation in order to examine the nature of that to which we are attracted. Since it is not uncommon for us to be attracted to that which is unhealthy for us, even as one who is a condition of poor health may find appealing foods that are unhealthy, this stage or rung or valley requires that we withhold acceding to passion until we determine if what attracts us is worthy of proceeding further in this process.

But understanding whether what attracts us is healthy for us or not requires that we understand how we are constructed—that is, what is conducive to our health and what is detrimental. For example, the Bahá'í Writings affirm that God fashioned us with an inherent love of reality. We love stuff, can't get enough of stuff because the first emanation from God to humankind is our desire to find out about stuff:

Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created beings embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone. Other beings and organisms are deprived of this potentiality and attainment. God has created or deposited this love of reality in man. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations* 60)

But why are we created with this love of reality, whether it be a tree, a

flower, a pet, or another person? The *húrí* behind this inherent or “God-given” affection is that everything in creation manifests some aspect of the nature of the same Creator, from whom we emanated as a breath of spirit: “[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” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 178).

So that’s why we love stuff! Because in some way, everything, including ourselves, reminds us of our sacred origin and that to which we long to return, even though we may spend our lives oblivious to the source of that insatiable desire.

That is why we are attracted so intensely, especially to people, because love is a law of our creation, even as gravity is a law of relationships among physical objects. But where the force of physical attraction depends on proximity and mass, the force of spiritual attraction (the beginning stage of love) increases according to spiritual proximity and the extent (with regard to both quantity and quality) that another being manifests the attributes of God.

So, romantic love is not an illusion after all, not merely a silly fiction invented by Provençal poets. Love is a universal spiritual law. And this law does indeed work, whether or not we want it to work:

Love is the cause of God’s revelation unto man, the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things. . . . Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the divers elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 27)

But the entire process of love is not confined to this initial attraction, nor is its success subject to the incidents and accidents of life, nor is it beyond the operation of free will. Thus, we may indeed be blindsided by

the SUV of love, but what happens after that is in our hands. This is why free will plays such a vital role in the second stage of this process. Because if we are not in a condition of health, we may well be attracted to that which is precisely unhealthy for us, in much the same way that someone who is unhealthy physically will be attracted to precisely the wrong foods. In short, our emotions, regardless of how powerful and intense they may be, are not always the best means for determining how we should respond, though certainly we should not ignore them. But until we examine the source of the emotions, we must realize that they may lead us in precisely the wrong direction.

To stress the importance of escaping from or progressing beyond this initial, intense, ecstatic attraction and proceeding to an intellectual investigation and comprehension of that to which we are attracted, Bahá'u'lláh employs the following powerful metaphorical image about proceeding from the stage of ecstatic attraction to the stage of understanding or knowledge:

And if, confirmed by the Creator, the lover escapes from the claws of the eagle of love, he will enter the Valley of Knowledge and come out of doubt into certitude, and turn from the darkness of illusion to the guiding light of the fear of God. His inner eyes will open and he will privily converse with his Beloved; he will set ajar the gate of truth and piety, and shut the doors of vain imaginings. (*Seven Valleys* 11)

Of course, the problem is that in the midst of passion, the very last thing we are interested in doing is summoning up sufficient free will to apply our intellect, so as to extract ourselves from what seems so ecstatic. A brief look at a sonnet by John Donne portrays this dilemma extremely well:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God; for you  
As yet but knock; breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend  
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp'd town, to another due,  
Labour to admit you, but O, to no end.

Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be loved fain,  
But am betroth'd unto your enemy;  
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

(1117)

Here the speaker desires to love God. Indeed, on an intellectual level he really does love God, but he has been caught in the claws of the eagle of love, and cannot employ sufficient free will to extricate himself from an unhealthy addiction to, and seduction by, some ignoble passions. The speaker is not clear what this attraction might be, but since it is ruled over by “your enemy” (sin, Satan, etc.), we must presume it is some form of passion that violates religious law and distracts the speaker from his attention to his love of God.

What’s important here is that the speaker is perceptive, intelligent, knows what has occurred and why. We can imagine that if the speaker were a real character instead of Donne’s fictional persona, he might have written a letter instead of a sonnet, something like this:

Dear God,

Thanks a lot for all the Free Will—

I tried it out this morning and got the house really clean for the first time!

But in all candor, I would really rather that You just take care of things Yourself.

Sincerely,

John Donne

And had he done so, God might well have written a response that would go something like this:

Dear John,

“Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee.

Know this, O servant.”<sup>1</sup>

Love and Forgiveness,

God

#### EXTERNAL GUIDANCE IN LOVE AS A PROCESS

This brings us to the single most crucial ingredient in this authentic love relationship with God, the *húrí* of all the *húrís* of love, how to create a system that will foster love as a process, that will allow for, indeed, encourage and insist upon, human reflection, understanding and free will, and yet provide enough encouragement and guidance that we could reasonably be expected to be held accountable for succeeding, even as Bahá'u'lláh has assured us: “It follows, therefore, that every man hath been, and will continue to be, able of himself to appreciate the Beauty of God, the Glorified. Had he not been endowed with such a capacity, how could he be called to account for his failure?” (*Gleanings* 143).

This ingredient is external guidance. Guidance is the most essential ingredient in the bridge between the dual expressions of reality. Of course, the Manifestation of God is the Intermediary between worlds. But because the station and function of these remarkable Beings is often misunderstood or misconstrued, we need to pay careful attention to what the Bahá'í texts have to say about the ontology of the Prophets, if we are to understand this part of the process.

We begin with the problem of the gap—how the Creator constructs a bridge between the metaphysical and physical aspects of reality, the process by which the will, or wish, or command *Kun!* (“Be!”) produces the results *Yakúnu!* (“It is!”). Let us first portray this process simply in the following terms: from God emanates the wish to be known, a will that emanates in the form of the Holy Spirit, the medium or power, if you will, by which the Manifestation receives this wish and becomes empowered to translate that desire into creative increments of progressive guidance and

action to the physical or human reality. This top-down view of the process thus begins in the realm of the spirit, the dwelling place of the essentially unknowable reality of the Creator and the preexistent reality of the Manifestations. The Kingdom of Names is then brought into being by degrees through the Manifestations, who provide guidance in three different conditions or capacities in order to forge the Kingdom of Names into a replica of the qualities and attributes of the spiritual world.

The symbol created by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to represent this process is very useful in portraying the causal relationship among these three aspects of reality: the will, the transmittal of that will into increments of action, and the gradual shaping of spiritual forms into physical representation (see figure 1).

But here is where we come to a subtle but interesting and important point about this symbol: in this arrangement, there seems to be a clear *subordination* of physical reality to spiritual reality. In effect, we are assisted by the Manifestations in fashioning a lesser reality into a social statement of spiritual principles which are already extant in the realm of the spirit (see figure 2).

This inference is borne out by an axiomatic observation by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye” (*Selections* 178).

However, by rearranging this symbol as it appears on the corners of the Shrine of the Báb (see figure 3), we can sense a different relationship and, in many ways, a slightly different, more expansive, and complete meaning: a *collateral* relationship in which the physical and metaphysical expressions of the Creator are *both* complete expressions of reality, one expression being the outer or visible aspect of that reality, and the other being the unseen counterpart of that reality. This inference is equally confirmed by another axiomatic statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. What ever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven” (*Promulgation* 9).

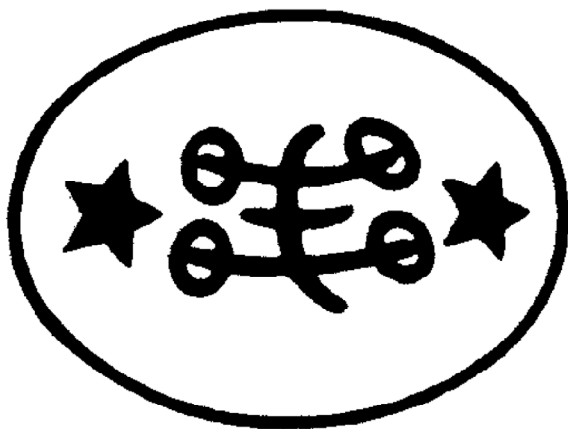


Figure 1.

Of particular relevance to this discourse is this second understanding of the relationship between the twin realms of creation, for the world of the spirit is no less a product of the Creator than is the physical realm. Thus, if these two realities are the exact counterpart of each other, then the complete panoply of the infinite expressions of infinite spiritual reality must find expression in the physical world. For example, if one of the attributes of the spiritual realm is limitlessness, then limitlessness must necessarily also find expression in the physical aspect of creation, whether that attribute apply to time, space, plenitude, or complexity.

The ability to embrace infinity—even the willingness to consider it as a possibility—flies in the face of all science and most religious and philosophical belief systems. But it helps us immensely in considering something which is equally perplexing, even absurd, in all fields of learning (especially sociology, anthropology, and history): the idea that our planet has been visited periodically by beings who, though human in physical respects, are ontologically quite distinct from ordinary human beings. Stated axiomatically, we can assert the following two statements, the first from Bahá'u'lláh's Words of Wisdom: "The source of all learning is the knowledge of God, exalted be His Glory, and this cannot be attained save



## TOP-DOWN VIEW OF GUIDANCE PROCESS

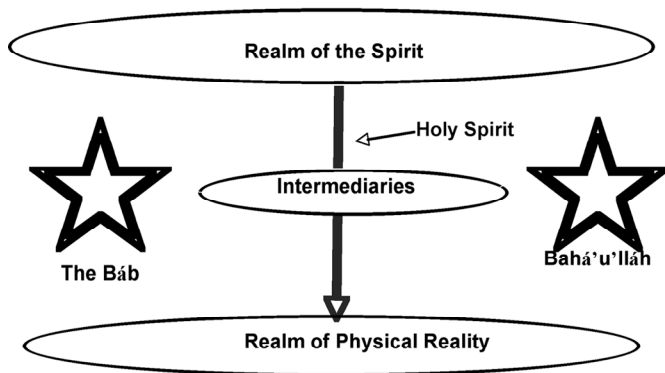


Figure 2.

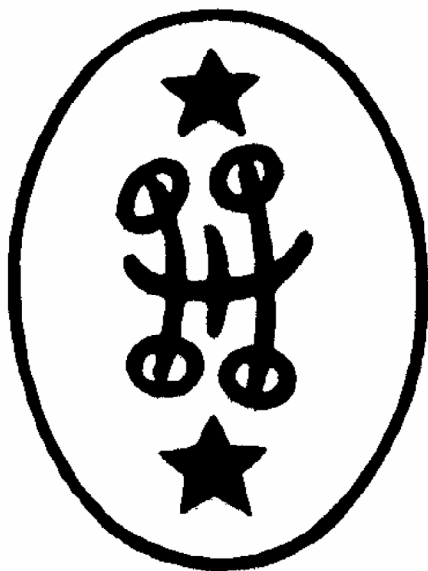
through the knowledge of His Divine Manifestation” (*Tablets* 156). The second axiom is asserted by Shoghi Effendi: “We cannot know God directly, but only through His Prophets. We can pray to Him realizing that through His Prophets we know Him, or we can address our prayer in thought to Bahá’u’lláh, not as God, but as the Door to our knowing God” (*Messages to Alaska* 71).

Obviously, then, if we are to understand how these beings serve as a bridge between the Creator and the world of the spirit and ourselves, it is crucial that we know something about the ontology of the Manifestations. Equally informed by such knowledge will be our ability to establish a meaningful love relationship with this essentially unknowable Being.

## ONTOLOGY AND THE MANIFESTATIONS

As we study the Manifestations in Their function as the bridge between the twin expressions of reality, we discover that we experience the guiding influence of the Manifestations in three stages.

**Stage one.** The Manifestations assist us prior to Their appearance in



**Figure 3.**

human form by providing sufficient influence to forge our planet and the system that contains it into a progressive and creative organism, thereby reversing what would subsequently occur without such external input of energy—the planet, abiding by the second law of thermodynamics, would succumb to entropy and degenerate into a chaotic, molten glob of stuff which, in time, would cool into a not-so-hot glob of stuff. Put simply, while the earth, like a seed in the matrix or body of the universe, has the inherent capacity to evolve through stages of successive change, given its propitious position in regard to the sun, the Manifestation as a preexistent being oversees this process.

Does this observation imply that *They* guide the evolution of the planet or, as we begin to evolve, do *They* appear in the form of advanced tadpoles, in case we are having too much fun in the water and refuse to crawl onto the shore to continue our evolution so that we can later play in the trees with our similarly evolving simian friends?

While there is much that we do not know about this first stage, we do

know that the Prophets preexist in the world of the Spirit prior to Their appearance on earth: “The Prophets, unlike us, are pre-existent. The soul of Christ existed in the spiritual world before His birth in this world. We cannot imagine what that world is like, so words are inadequate to picture His state of being” (Shoghi Effendi, to an individual believer, 9 October 1947).

Christ, of course, refers to this preincarnate condition when He states that, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). Likewise, Bahá’u’lláh refers to this same condition when He alludes to the “School of inner meaning.” Later in the same discourse Bahá’u’lláh states, “By the one true God! We read the Tablet ere it was revealed, while ye were unaware, and We had perfect knowledge of the Book when ye were yet unborn” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* par. 175–76).

Perhaps the most amazing available insight into the preexistent condition and the willful and creative power of these divine Beings is revealed in two passages which indicate Their part in determining the location in which They will become Manifest, as indicated by Shoghi Effendi’s statement that “[T]he primary reason why the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh chose to appear in Persia, and to make it the first repository of their Revelation, was because, of all the peoples and nations of the civilized world, that race and nation had, as so often depicted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, sunk to such ignominious depths, and manifested so great a perversity, as to find no parallel among its contemporaries” (*Advent* 18).

And Shoghi Effendi’s statement that the ascension of Bahá’u’lláh released Him from the human Temple, through which He had for a time chosen to reveal Himself: “[T]he dissolution of the tabernacle wherein the soul of the Manifestation of God had chosen temporarily to abide signaled its release from the restrictions which an earthly life had, of necessity, imposed upon it” (*God Passes By* 244). It is my own opinion that one meaning of the Súrih-i-Haykal is that the Manifestation is revealing to us the part He plays in fashioning that human edifice through which He will convey to us the new Revelation.

**Stage two.** The Manifestations assist us most apparently and observably by intervening periodically in human history, in order to alter the

course of what would be yet another expression of the same law of entropy without this divine guidance—that is, humankind descending into the abyss of appetites, warfare, eventual extinction. This direct *physical* intervention, accompanied by an even more influential infusion of spiritual renewal, has the function of updating laws and institutions, reorganizing or reinventing appropriate paradigms of social structure, reaffirming and refining laws of personal hygiene and comportment, and, most important of all, articulating an ever more expansive and complete description of reality as a whole, and our individual and collective relationship to reality. The end result of this second means by which the two expressions of reality are bridged fosters and nurtures the central objective of human society as a whole: the creation of an “ever-advancing civilization” (*Gleanings* 215).

Finally, the Manifestation continues to guide and assist physical creation after His ascent from the confines of His earthly persona. As we have already noted, after His ascension, the Manifestation still remains for us the most complete expression of the Creator, and the essential intermediary between us and the essentially unknowable essence of Divinity. However, since the powers of the Manifestation are infinitely beyond our own station and understanding, this relationship of entering “the Presence of God”—via our knowledge of the Manifestation—should not be thought of as ever being complete or static.

We are naturally most fully aware of the Manifestation operating in this second stage of His function as intermediary. In this capacity, in which He appears as if He were a man among men, He perfectly incarnates all the virtues of God and, once unveiled or unconcealed, openly reveals His station and articulates a more expansive description of reality together with specific laws, ordinances, and admonitions about human behavior, and about how humankind can collectively and progressively construct a social edifice to benefit the evolving spiritual and intellectual conditions of the body politic.

In this second stage, the Manifestation can correctly be said to represent for us the most complete expression of godliness we can comprehend during our own incarnate or associational stage of existence. What we may not understand completely is that these specialized Beings are

Manifestations prior to Their birth and incarnation, and that They are also (in this second stage) quite aware of Their station and function from the beginning of Their consciousness after They have assumed a human persona: “Verily, from the beginning that Holy Reality is conscious of the secret of existence, and from the age of childhood signs of greatness appear and are visible in Him” (*Some Answered Questions* 155).

Comprehending this conscious awareness of station, the Manifestation challenges our understanding of His station with passages that sometimes seem enigmatic in this regard. For example, many people have trouble recognizing this capacity or consciousness when the Manifestations cite some critical point of change in their awareness or station. For example, in Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablet to Násiri’d-Dín Sháh, He states that He was but a man like others until God endowed Him with capacity and knowledge as He lay bound in chains in the Síyáh-Chál:

“O King! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing. And He bade Me lift up My voice between earth and heaven, and for this there befell Me what hath caused the tears of every man of understanding to flow. The learning current amongst men I studied not; their schools I entered not. Ask of the city wherein I dwelt, that thou mayest be well assured that I am not of them who speak falsely. This is but a leaf which the winds of the will of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Praised, have stirred.” (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 11–12)

Certainly on first reading and at face value, such a statement would seem to indicate that the Manifestation is an ordinary human being who becomes transformed or inspired by God. The same conclusion could be inferred from passages by Christ and Muhammad, and passages about the transforming experience of Moses when He encounters the Burning Bush, and the Buddha when He becomes enlightened as He meditates beneath the Bo Tree.

Some might wish to view this ostensible point of change as an outright subterfuge created by the Prophet to explain why He suddenly possesses a power which He has heretofore not made manifest. Others perceive in these passages the description of the point at which the Manifestation is given the sign by God that He is to begin doing that for which He has taken on human aspect. 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it abundantly clear, in an authoritative explication of the passage in the Tablet to Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, that these are not points of ontological change, nor are they points at which the Manifestation suddenly becomes aware of the station He has been ordained to occupy: "Briefly, the Holy Manifestations have ever been, and ever will be, Luminous Realities; no change or variation takes place in Their essence. Before declaring Their manifestation, They are silent and quiet like a sleeper, and after Their manifestation, They speak and are illuminated, like one who is awake" (*Some Answered Questions* 85–86).

Even though the Manifestations choose to limit the expression of Their powers while They abide in the second stage of Their appearance as a man among men, this limitation is one of choice. For example, the Manifestation has conscious awareness of whatever He wants to know. He is, according to Shoghi Effendi "omniscient at will" (*Unfolding Destiny* 449). One interesting explanation of the process by which the Prophet possesses this inherent knowledge of reality is described in very specific terms by 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "Since the Sanctified Realities, the supreme Manifestations of God, surround the essence and qualities of the creatures, transcend and contain existing realities and understand all things, therefore, Their knowledge is divine knowledge, and not acquired—that is to say, it is a holy bounty; it is a divine revelation" (*Some Answered Questions* 157–58).

The distinct ontology of the Prophets during Their incarnate state logically derives from Their inherently perfect manifestation of all the attributes of God, one of which is power. They are omnipotent. Even though They carefully restrain Themselves from overt demonstrations of this capacity in order that humankind will recognize them for spiritual reasons and not some overt or sensational actions, They are literally able to do whatsoever They think appropriate, even as Bahá'u'lláh observes: "He Who

is the Dawning-place of God's Cause hath no partner in the Most Great Infallibility. He it is Who, in the kingdom of creation, is the Manifestation of 'He doeth whatsoever He willeth'" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* par. 47).

**Stage three.** Finally, the Manifestations function as intermediaries after Their ascension to the realm of the spirit. In this station, no longer constrained by the dramaturgy of feigned humanness, the Manifestation is able to oversee and assist the process He has set in motion. In this station He is fully able to assist us collectively and individually, as we attempt to understand and implement the divine plan He has revealed. Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the wisdom and power of this third condition with the following well-known verse from the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*: "In My presence amongst you there is a wisdom, and in My absence there is yet another, inscrutable to all but God, the Incomparable, the All-Knowing. Verily, We behold you from Our realm of glory, and shall aid whosoever will arise for the triumph of Our Cause with the hosts of the Concourse on high and a company of Our favoured angels" (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* par 53).

While this wisdom is inscrutable, another *húrí*, if you will, Shoghi Effendi in *God Passes By* alludes to part of the wisdom in this third condition with wonderful clarity:

[T]he dissolution of the tabernacle wherein the soul of the Manifestation of God had chosen temporarily to abide signaled its release from the restrictions which an earthly life had, of necessity, imposed upon it. Its influence no longer circumscribed by any physical limitations, its radiance no longer beclouded by its human temple, that soul could henceforth energize the whole world to a degree unapproached at any stage in the course of its existence on this planet. (*God Passes By* 244)

Another aspect of this third stage that is particularly relevant to our own third stage of existence—the first two being the world of the womb and the world of physical experience—has to do with the fact that the indirect relationship with God by means of the Manifestation as intermediary persists throughout our existence into the realm of our post-carnate

state of existence: "We will have experience of God's spirit through His Prophets in the next world, but God is too great for us to know without this Intermediary. The Prophets know God, but how is more than our human minds can grasp" (Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, November 14, 1947).

An important aspect of the station of the Prophets, pertaining to all three stages of Their reality, but, for us, most particularly, to the second and third stages, is the fact that the Manifestation will ever remain for us the most complete understanding of the Creator we will ever have. Therefore, as Bahá'u'lláh explains at length in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, the concept of gaining access or proximity to God (entering the "presence" of God) is a figurative and spiritual one, not a literal fact. In other words, God will ever remain "essentially" unknowable, and all our knowledge of God will ever be acquired through the intermediary of the Manifestation, whether in this life or in the afterlife: "He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of men can never be known except through His Manifestation, and His Manifestation can adduce no greater proof of the truth of His Mission than the proof of His own Person" (*Gleanings* 49); "The source of all learning is the knowledge of God, exalted be His Glory, and this cannot be attained save through the knowledge of His Divine Manifestation" (*Tablets* 156).

Yet another extremely significant feature of the distinct ontology of the Manifestations as intermediaries is that when They describe Their authority as being derived from God, it is totally clear in the Bahá'í texts that the specific channeling of this command or Primal Will into specific ideas, appropriate language, and social design derives from the willpower and creativity of the Manifestations themselves. True, They repeatedly acknowledge that all that They do and say derives from God working through Them, and in the sense that it is the will or wish of God to bring about a creation capable of knowing and worshiping Him, this is precisely accurate. But it is equally clear from several passages that the specific design of the dispensation wrought by the Manifestation in His station of "distinction" (that is, as Prophet appearing at a particular time in particular circumstances in which there are



specific needs and specific capacities), the Manifestation is the fashioner of His Revelation.

For example, Shoghi Effendi states that the Kitáb-i-Aqdas “may well be regarded as the brightest emanation of the mind of Bahá’u’lláh, as the Mother Book of His Dispensation, and the Charter of His New World Order” (*Synopsis* 2). Likewise, in another passage, Shoghi Effendi praises the world order that Bahá’u’lláh has devised as the product of His own creative and willful genius. This extended metaphor, itself a marvelous work of the Guardian’s own creative genius, states this capacity in remarkably effective terms:

Not ours, the living witnesses of the all-subduing potency of His Faith, to question, for a moment, and however dark the misery that enshrouds the world, the ability of Bahá’u’lláh to forge, with the hammer of His Will, and through the fire of tribulation, upon the anvil of this travailing age, and in the particular shape His mind has envisioned, these scattered and mutually destructive fragments into which a perverse world has fallen, into one single unit, solid and indivisible, able to execute His design for the children of men. (*Promised Day is Come* 124)

Put simply, the Manifestation is not merely God’s mouthpiece or amanuensis. He is the creative force that translates the Creator’s wish, will, and desire into increments of creative revelation, action, and design, appropriate to what He sees as propitious for a given period in human evolution on a given planet.

One common way of explaining this intermediary relationship is the analogy of a mirror, a figurative image employed in the Bahá’í Writings and frequently used by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. However, this analogy is sometimes incorrectly understood and conveyed by believers, and thus fails to elucidate the concept it was intended to explain. Indeed, it can confuse the entire issue of the ontology of the Prophets.

In this analogy, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compares the Manifestation to a perfect mirror, because the Manifestation has the power to convey flawlessly all

the infinite attributes of God. In this sense, the Manifestation can correctly be described as a mirror image of the Creator, though ever remaining essentially distinct from the Creator. Thus, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the Manifestation, while conveying to us the bounties of God, is not identical with the essence of God. Nor is the Manifestation a piece of God. Thus, properly understood, the mirror analogy conveys the idea that a perfect mirror is capable of conveying flawlessly the powers and properties of the sun, without itself actually being or conveying a piece of the sun—the mirror does not enable the sun literally to come to earth. The mirror is the means by which we receive the bounties and attributes of the sun's light, warmth, and nourishing influence.

The problem with the perfect mirror analogy crops up when it is misused to assert that we who are finite cannot bear to behold that which is infinite, even as we cannot stand to behold the sun directly. Therefore, so this interpretation goes, God sends the Manifestations because we *can* bear to behold them. Of course, the logic of such an explanation fails because if the mirror is perfect, the light and power emanating from it will be just as bright and intense and unbearable to behold as the source.

What this interpretation of the analogy is getting at, however, is logical and important. Un-incarnated in a human form and unarticulated in human speech, the divine powers and bounties and attributes would be incomprehensible to us. But by translating Godliness into human terms and human language, the Prophet enables us to understand the nature of the Creator, even though the Prophet does not literally become the Creator, is not of the essence as the Creator. This is the very problem that so confounded those present at the Synod of Nicaea, who in the year 325 A.D. incorrectly determined (by majority vote) that Christ was "very God of very God," *homoeous* (of one and the same essence as God or God incarnate), a mistake which caused the next Manifestation, Muhammad, to chastise these clerics numerous times in the Qur'án.

In other words, the mirror image is valuable because it explains that the Manifestation can be an intermediary by means of which Godliness can be conveyed to us without every becoming God Himself, except in a figurative sense. Thus we can correctly assert that the Manifestation is

the sole means by which we can comprehend God and that in this capacity as intermediary, He functions as a bridge between the realm of the spirit and the physical world. But in making this assertion, we must ever take care to realize the distinction in essence and station between God and these Emissaries.

Consequently, an analogy that may sometimes be more useful in explicating the station and capacity of the Manifestation in the second stage is that of the prism. In its capacity to refract the ostensibly white light of the sun into the infinite array of constituent colors, the prism demonstrates well how the Manifestation as Teacher and Emissary translates the Holy Spirit emanating from God, which we cannot comprehend outright, into increments of specific powers and virtues that we can perceive and comprehend. The prism illustrates well how the Manifestation translates the otherwise imperceptible powers and attributes of God into visible attributes and patterns of action. But the analogy also has the additional value of demonstrating that the array of attributes is endless, infinite, even as the spectrum itself is infinite, whether we proceed towards the longer waves of light (infrared, micro-, and radio waves), or ever more finite waves (ultraviolet waves, x-, and gamma rays).

Thus far, then, we have traced, in a very limited and necessarily abbreviated fashion, the intermediary process by which we can bridge the gap between the metaphysical and physical aspects of reality, so that we might establish an authentic love relationship with the heretofore hidden treasure that is the Creator. Rehearsing a portion of this process might go something like this:

From the Unknowable Essence of God emanates the Primal Wish or  
Will of God

by means of the Holy Spirit

that conveys this wish to the Preexistent Manifestation,

Who determines to assume the guise of a human persona

that He might exemplify Godliness in His person and actions and

provide laws and guidance for creative human action

so that we can progress in our love relationship with God.

However, before we can make progress, yet another bridge must be crossed, analogous to the means by which the Hidden Treasure causes His own will to become manifest in physical reality. Our own essential reality, our soul, is likewise a hidden treasure, an unknowable essence, most especially while we dwell in this post-embryonic existence.

From our soul emanates our spirit, and with it the powers and faculties of the soul which express themselves as reason, will, memory, imagination or ideation, emotion, love, and so forth. We are aware that reason—what Bahá'u'lláh calls the “rational faculty” (*Gleanings* 164)—is associated with the brain, though it is not itself “in” the brain, or derived from the brain. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, this is an associative relationship, akin to the relationship between the soul and the human temple as a whole: “The mind which is in man, the existence of which is recognized—where is it in him? If you examine the body with the eye, the ear or the other senses, you will not find it; nevertheless, it exists. Therefore, the mind has no place, but it is connected with the brain” (*Some Answered Questions* 242).

In this sense, the brain is a complex transceiver, not the ultimate source of anything. And when both the brain and its power of bidirectional communication are in a state of health, this bridge between the essentially metaphysical reality of the soul and the essentially physical construct that is the body is transparent. The self you sense and the self you present to those around you are relatively accurate and transparent representations of your spiritual nature and condition. However, when the brain becomes injured or is afflicted with disease, defect, or some form of progressive neurological dysfunction, the mirror image of the soul that is the physical self and your ability to make that vehicle portray the real you become ever more distorted and inaccurate.

Possibly the most intriguing aspect of this intermediary relationship between the soul and the body is that this veil between the real you and the metaphorical expression of you is sometimes veiled even from your own sense of self. That is, while a stroke or other physical disabilities may deprive us of the capacity to express to others what we are feeling, thinking, or becoming, brain injury or dysfunction can also cause us to lose the

sense of our own self. Amnesia is an obvious example of this, but so is Alzheimer's disease or other sources of dementia.

Stated axiomatically so long as our consciousness maintains its associative relationship with the body through the brain, our awareness of our own self is dependent on a healthy brain functioning in association with a healthy body.

Stated in a broader context, we receive information from two fundamental sources while we are in our second stage of existence, our association or relationship with physical reality. We derive or infer ideas indirectly through the information gathered by our senses, information that is then channeled through the brain to the mind, and thence to the repository of memory in the soul. This inferential process is often referred to as the scientific method. Or we can receive information through intuition, inspiration, prayer, or reflection—that is, ideas and information which may come from the realm of the spirit.

The point is that while some may give more credence to one or the other of these two fundamental modalities, one source is not necessarily more valuable or more reliable than the other. Both processes are subject to misinformation, whether through faulty data or logic in the case of the indirect process, or through vain imaginations, in the case of what we believe to be divine inspiration. In short, no matter what our source of information about reality may be while we are in the physical stage of our existence, we are challenged to weigh the validity and the usefulness of this information with the rational faculty of our conscious mind.

Because all information, from whatever source, ultimate ends up in the repository of our conscious mind, we can have only a relative degree of certitude in this life about our own powers to come to correct conclusions. It is for this reason that the holy texts function as our touchstone against which we can assess what conclusions we make. They are, in this sense, the infallible *mizán* or *qustás*—the “standard,” the “balance,” the “scales” by which all other verities are assayed. It is precisely for this reason that we are admonished to review our progress and efforts on a daily basis, not merely every so often. Only by such systematic weighing of our own perspectives against the standards set forth by an infallible and

totally reliable resource can we have any degree of confidence that we are complying with the reality that is in our best interest.

In the third stage of our existence, that is, after death, when our conscious mind and other essential human powers are released from the constraints of having to work through the intermediary of an ever more dysfunctional brain and body, we will find ourselves capable of understanding and progressing more rapidly. However, we will always be exhorted to attain understanding through the exercise of our will, and to express that understanding in some form of action. Perhaps that action will be to assist those still in an associative relationship with physical reality, or to perform other tasks that are presently quite beyond our understanding.

As we consider this ingenious process by which we are led to know and understand our own nature—even as we simultaneously come to know and love the Creator in Whose image we have been created—it finally becomes clear that the veiling of spiritual reality from us is the only way that we could have become responsible for our own progress and enlightenment.

#### O SON OF MY HANDMAID!

Didst thou behold immortal sovereignty, thou wouldst strive to pass from this fleeting world. But to conceal the one from thee and to reveal the other is a mystery which none but the pure in heart can comprehend. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words, Persian 41)

#### NOTES

Presented at the 29th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 13 August 2005.

1. Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words, Arabic 5.

## WORKS CITED

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Foundations of World Unity Compiled from Addresses and Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971.
- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911–1912*. 11th ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979.
- . *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*. Comp. Howard MacNutt. 2nd ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- . *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá* Trans. Marzieh Gail et al. Comp. Research Dept., Universal House of Justice. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982.
- . *Some Answered Questions*. Comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney. 4th ed. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.
- . *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*. Vol. 2. New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1940.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985.
- . *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992.
- . *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude* Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974.
- . *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* Trans. Marzieh Gail and Ali-Kuli Khan. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984.
- . *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts: Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2002.
- . *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Comp. Research Dept., Universal House of Justice. Trans. Habib Taherzadeh et al. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978.

- A Compilation on Scholarship* Comp. Research Dept., Universal House of Justice. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1995.
- De Rougemont, Denis. *Love in the Western World*. New York: Pantheon, 1956.
- Donne, John K. "Batter My Heart, Three-Person'd God." *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*. Vol. 1. 6th ed. New York: Norton, 1993. 1117.
- Hatcher, John. *The Arc of Ascent: The Purpose of Physical Reality II*. Oxford: George Ronald, 1994.
- . *Close Connections: The Bridge between Spiritual and Physical Reality*. Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2005.
- . *The Metaphorical Nature of Physical Reality*. Thornhill, Ont.: Canadian Association for Studies on the Bahá'í Faith, 1977.
- . *The Purpose of Physical Reality: The Kingdom of Names* Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987.
- Hatcher, William S. *Minimalism: A Bridge between Classical Philosophy and the Bahá'í Revelation*. Hong Kong: Juxta Publishing 2002.
- King James Bible*. Standard Text edition.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice* Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971.
- . *High Endeavours: Messages to Alaska*. Anchorage: National Spiritual Assembly of Alaska, 1976.
- . *The Promised Day Is Come*. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980.
- . *Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'í Community of the British Isles*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981.
- A Synopsis and Codification of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy Book of Bahá'u'lláh*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1973.