

The Manifestations of God and Their Function in Human History

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Introduction

The Bahá'í Writings explain that the motive force in the development of mankind is the coming of the Manifestation or Prophet of God. Very few people would disagree that human history has been influenced by the Founders of the world's great religions. The powerful impact on civilization of Christ, Moses, the Buddha, or Muḥammad can be seen both in the collective development of humanity and in the life of every individual. From an historical point of view, the Manifestations of God are a few well-known personages whose existence may be questioned but whose traces are so evident that no man can fail to acknowledge them.

The greatness of the Manifestations of God has been described as follows:

The Manifestation of God is the Archetype, and His life is the supreme pattern. His vision not arrested by time and space, encompasses the future as well as the past. He is the only and necessary link between one cycle of social evolution and another. Furthermore, the Manifestation of God releases deep reservoirs of spiritual powers and quickens the forces latent in man. By Him and

Him alone, can man attain 'second birth'. Through Him and Him alone, can man know God.¹

This powerful statement explains very well who is the Manifestation of God, and introduces a very important concept: that the knowledge of God can only be achieved through the Manifestation of God. Bahá'u'lláh affirms:

The source of all learning is the Manifestation of God, exalted be His Glory, and this cannot be attained save through knowledge of His divine Manifestation.²

And in another similar passage He says:

The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been and will continue to be, closed in the face of man. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto his holy court. As a token of His mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving-kindness He hath manifested unto man the Day-Stars of His Divine Guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own self.³

It is in the lives of these Luminous Beings that the deeper meanings of God's attributes can be most perfectly under-

stood. Of course, only those who live during the time of a Manifestation of God have the opportunity of observing Him directly. Bahá'u'lláh explains that the essential connection between the individual and God is maintained through the Writings and words of each Manifestation. Bahá'is believe that the Writings of the Messengers of God are the Word of God and it is towards these Writings that man should turn to grow closer to God and acquire a deeper knowledge of Him. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Say: the first and foremost testimony establishing His Truth is His Own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other He hath established the words He hath revealed as proofs of His reality and truth . . . He hath endowed every soul with the capacity to recognize the signs of God.*⁴

We may begin our investigation by studying the common historical aspects of the Manifestations of God. Each Manifestation of God comes from a different background: they include princes and noblemen like the Buddha and Bahá'u'lláh, priests like Zoroaster, merchants such as Muḥammad and the Báb, craftsmen like Jesus, and courtiers like Moses. Each also brings a message to humanity, a message that is God given, and which deals with the spiritual aspects of the life of humanity.

In the beginning very few people follow the Manifestations of God, creating great scandals within the population,

very often leading to some form of persecution, which sometimes ushers in the violent death of some of the Manifestations, and the murder of several thousands of Their followers. However, despite these events, the Manifestations of God eventually demonstrate their power of renewal: they transform society and usher in a new civilization. The teachings of these Personages, unlike the guidance of philosophers, conquer humanity through the power they inherently possess, and through the practice of their teachings flourishing civilizations are created: every civilization we know was born through such a process.

In one of His Writings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that "two calls to success and prosperity are being raised . . . the one is the call of civilization, of the progress of the material world."⁵ This call belongs to the phenomenal world, and helps mankind achieve physical accomplishments. It comprises all the laws and regulations, principles and lofty ideals which are the result of "sound minds," and the efforts of the wise individuals in the course of time. "The propagator and executive power of this call is just government."⁶ Next, there is "the soul-stirring call of God, Whose spiritual teachings are safeguards of everlasting glory . . . and cause the attributes of mercy to be revealed in the human world and the life beyond. This second call is founded upon the instructions and exhortations of God."⁷ After a certain period of time, these teachings lose their effectiveness amongst men, and according to the law

of evolution, since they offered their contribution, they decline and die.

It is after such events that a new Manifestation appears, bringing new laws, announcing a new message so that humanity can grow towards spirituality through a further stage, As we have seen previously, “the circle of existence returns” and the purpose “in them is the evolution of spiritual men.”⁸

The Manifestations of God differentiate Themselves from the great heroes of history for two reasons:

1. Their teachings, set forth mostly by words and deeds, constitute the magna charta for the spiritual development of humanity. “Without the teachings of God the world of humanity is like the animal kingdom . . .” These teachings, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá adds, “are the bestowals specialized for man . . .” and are “the basis of all progress in the history of humanity.”⁹
2. The spiritual energy they give to any person who voluntarily decides to get in touch with this force is the cause of his transformation.

Proofs and Purposes of Their Mission

How can mankind recognize these Luminous Beings, these Perfect Mirrors? As we have previously seen there are three steps: the first step establishing this truth is “His Own Self,” the second step “is His Revelation,” and the third is “the words He hath revealed as proofs of His reality and truth.”¹⁰ As Bahá’u’lláh explains:

*He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of man 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.*¹¹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá addresses this very important issue in this way:

*One of the proofs is through the fulfillment of former prophecies, the second proof are the creative words and phrases which salute the hearts of humanity, the third are their deeds and fourth are their teachings.*¹²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not regard prophecies and miracles as very important, as they are very hard to understand and can be refuted very easily; also, they are “convincing to a limited number only.”¹³ Instead, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives importance to deeds of the Manifestations of God, to Their teachings, and to the influence Their words have on the human heart. He thus writes: “The Divine Educator must teach by words and also by deed, thus revealing to all the straight path of truth.” Among Their deeds He emphasizes Their “strength and endurance”¹⁴ under tests and difficulties. About the influence of the Words of the Manifestation of God, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

The proof of the validity of a Manifestation of God is the penetration and potency of His Word, the cultivation of heavenly attributes in the lives and hearts of His Followers and the bestowals of

*divine education upon the world of humanity. This is absolute proof. The world is a school where there must be Teachers of the Word of God.*¹⁵

In one of His Writings we read:

*If we wish to discover whether anyone of these Souls or Messengers was in reality a Prophet of God, we must investigate the facts surrounding His life and history, and the first point of our investigation will be the education He bestowed upon mankind.*¹⁶

Moreover He writes:

*It is evident, then, that the proofs of the validity and inspiration of a Prophet of God are the deeds of beneficent accomplishment and greatness emanating from Him. If He proves to be instrumental in the elevation and betterment of mankind, He is undoubtedly a valid and heavenly Messenger.*¹⁷

Elaborating on the requirements of the Manifestations of God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states: "The essential requirement and qualification of Prophethood is the training and the guidance of the people."¹⁸ The transformation produced by the influence exercised by the Manifestation of God upon His followers is so great that some of them offer up their lives for the Faith they have embraced. History will show if the claims of these Prophets are right or just words of an impostor.

At the request of one of His disciples, Christ explained how to distinguish true prophets from the false ones: "Ye shall

know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes of thorns, or figs of thistles?"¹⁹ Since we can recognize the Manifestations of God by 'Their fruits,' we should try to understand what these fruits are.

When They appear, the Manifestations of God have a twofold purpose: to foster the spiritual development of every human being, and to promote the progress of society. Bahá'u'lláh explains:

*God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind and provide all the means by which they can be established.*²⁰

Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh states in one of His Writings:

*And yet, is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall effect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's Universal Manifestation would be apparent.*²¹

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Prophets of God have been sent with

the purpose of quickening the soul of men into higher and divine recognitions . . . to train the souls of humanity and free them from the thralldom of natural instincts

*and physical tendencies*²²
and to

*teach and enlighten man, to explain to him the mystery of the power of the Holy Spirit; to enable him to reflect the light, and so, in his turn, to be the source of guidance to others.*²³

The forces released by the Manifestations of God are those instruments capable of transforming the heart of man, namely those negative qualities which through the power of the Word of God are capable of such a transformation. The first purpose fulfills the second: “to carry forward an ever advancing civilization,”²⁴ or as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would say, “unifying humanity and establishing universal peace”. In this sense we can say that “the Prophets have founded divine civilizations.”²⁵

Therefore, the Manifestations of God are the Educators of mankind, which is in need of Them because “the world of existence is but a jungle of disorder and confusion, a state of nature producing nothing but fruitless and useless trees.”²⁶ The Manifestations of God are thus like the sun: its warmth helps the seed planted in the soil of the human heart to grow and develop and yield its fruits.

The Words of Bahá’u’lláh pay befitting homage to such an important Being, Whose recognition is vital for every individual:

It is God’s supreme testimony, the clearest evidence of His Truth, the Signs of His consummate wisdom, the tokens of His mercy, the

*proofs of His most loving providence, the symbol of His most perfect grace.*²⁷

Sufferings and Denial

“In the beginning of every revelation adversities have prevailed, which later on have been turned into great prosperity.”²⁸ As we have seen, the appearance of the Manifestation of God upsets the equilibrium of the society in which He lives; later, His teachings gradually envelop the whole of humanity breaking all the time-honoured traditions, which mostly have turned into prejudices. In the Bible we read:

*He answered and said unto them, Well hath Esaias prophesied of you hypocrites, as it is written, This people honoureth me with their lips, but their heart is far from me. Howbeit in vain do they worship me teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. For laying aside the commandments of God, ye hold the tradition of men, as the washing of pots and cups: and many other such like things ye do.*²⁹

Through the help of the Manifestations of God the soul of man can make a conscious effort to draw closer to God and return to Him. This is an educational process in which man is transformed. Thus if these Personages were attractive and evident to human eyes – that is, to that same nature that must be overcome – how could this be a free choice?

It is for this reason that all the Manifestations have to pass through

severe trials: to enable every human being to purify their soul. Christ accepted to die on the cross for the well-being of humanity, Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb exclaim likewise that Their sufferings are the source for the improvement of man's character. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

*Consider the former generations: Witness how every time the Day-Star of Divine Bounty hath shed the light of His Revelation upon the world, the people of His Day have arisen against Him and repudiated His Truth . . .*³⁰

It is beyond the scope of this essay to deal with this issue at any greater length. This topic in fact deserves a more careful study and investigation on the part of every seeker.

Their Threefold Reality

In the Bahá'í Writings we read that the Manifestations of God convey to mankind "the Revelation of the Soul of God". That is, the first Emanation of the Divine Reality is reflected in the human reality of these Beings like the sun is reflected in a perfect mirror. The Manifestations of God are thus characterized by a threefold reality:

1. **Material:** Their bodies which, as for every human being, are subject to birth, to growth, to death, to sleep, and to the need of food and water.
2. **Human:** This refers to Their soul, Their individuality. In this connection Bahá'u'lláh says that "Everyone of Them is a Mirror of God."³¹ He writes moreover that the soul of the

Manifestation of God is a "perfect soul," "like a mirror wherein the Sun of Reality is reflected . . . the perfect expression of the Sun."³²

When we compare the souls of the Manifestations of God to those of other human beings, we see that Their souls occupy a different position. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

*The individual reality of the Manifestations of God is a holy reality, and for that reason it is sanctified and, in that which concerns its nature and quality, is distinguished from all other things...*³³

The difference between the souls of the Manifestations and ordinary human souls it is like that existing between the sun and the moon: one is the source of the rays, the other reflects them.

Each Manifestation of God also possesses a "rational soul" or "human spirit" says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and "share[s] it with all mankind." He explains that Their degree of perception is far different from man's and transcends human knowledge, in the sense that is "a conscious power, not a power of investigation and of research."³⁴ In the station of Their individualities, They are thus "so many different mirrors, because They have a special individuality, but that which is reflected in the mirrors is one sun."³⁵

It is comprehensible how these Luminous Beings, though differing from Each Other in many respects, yet are essentially one and the same.

3. **Divine:** This is the Word of God;

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that this reality has neither a beginning nor an end; it is eternal, yet it is inferior to God, because it was created by Him. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá compares these three aspects – material, human, divine – with a niche, a lamp within the niche, and the light which emanates from the lamp, respectively. Bahá’u’lláh writes that each Manifestation of God occupies a “double station,” divine and human and has a “twofold nature,” “the physical . . . and the spiritual.”³⁶ The Manifestations of God have access to the Will of God and therefore they are “the vehicle for the transmission of the Grace of the Divinity Itself.”

The Essence of God and The Manifestations

We have seen in the previous chapters that the Essence of God is unknowable and unreachable, as He “is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute” and “no tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures.”³⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that

*the Divine Essence surrounds all things. Verily, that which surrounds is greater than the surrounded, and the surrounded cannot contain that which is surrounded, nor comprehend its reality.*³⁸

Bahá’u’lláh unequivocally states:

Every attempt which from the beginning that has no beginning, hath been made to visualize and know God is limited by the exi-

*gencies of His Own creation.*³⁹

And ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that:

*. . . differentiation of stages in the contingent world is an obstacle to understanding . . . Every superior stage comprehendeth that which is inferior and discovereth the reality thereof, but the inferior one is unaware of that which is superior and cannot comprehend it. Thus man cannot grasp the Essence of Divinity.*⁴⁰

The active attributes of the Essence of God shine in the world of the kingdom and become manifest in the human world through the Manifestations of God. Therefore, the Manifestations of God are not incarnations of God, nor do They manifest His Essence. Bahá’u’lláh states:

*Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men. He is, and hath been, immensely exalted beyond all that can either be recounted or perceived . . . He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of man 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.*⁴¹

The Manifestations of God are thus an emanation of God; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that They

. . . are as mirrors which have acquired illumination from the Sun of Truth, but the Sun does not descend from its high zenith and does not effect entrance within the mirror. In truth, this mirror

*has attained complete polish and purity until the utmost capacity of reflection has been developed in it; therefore, the Sun of Reality with its fullest effulgence and splendour is revealed therein.*⁴²

The Manifestation of God is the visible expression of that same creative spirit which is the cause of existence and which guides the whole universe, and which manifests itself in a Being Who has the material, human and divine qualities expressed in their perfection, so that mankind can freely recognize Him and by virtue of the immense reservoir of energy released by the Manifestation attain to that transformation which is the core and purpose and purpose of human life.

Elaborating on the theme of His relationship to God, Bahá'u'lláh states:

*When I contemplate, O My God, the relationship that bindeth Me to Thee, I am moved to proclaim to all created things: 'Verily I am God'; and when I consider My Own Self, lo, I find it coarser than clay.*⁴³

In the same way, Christ states: "And he said unto him, why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments."⁴⁴

Though the Manifestations of God are powerful and pour upon mankind a great amount of energy, yet they are completely submitted to the Will of God and have no will of their own. Bahá'u'lláh refers of Himself as "but a leaf which the winds of the Will of Thy Lord . . . have

stirred."⁴⁵ In another passage He explains very clearly this relationship:

*This is the station in which one dieth to himself and liveth in God. Divinity whenever I mention it, indicateth My complete and absolute self-effacement. This is the station in which I have no control over mine own weal or woe, nor over my life nor over my resurrection.*⁴⁶

Similarly, Jesus states: "... Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing . . ."⁴⁷

The lives of the Manifestations of God offer clear examples of the complete submission unto the Will of God. They are also an example of how in our individual lives we should accept the Will of God as it comes and not in the way we would like It to be.

The Relationship between the Manifestations of God

In the Bahá'í Writings, the Manifestations of God are seen in Their mutual relations in two different perspectives: the station of unity and the station of distinction.

In the Station of Unity – that is, the station "of pure abstraction and essential unity"⁴⁸ – all of the Manifestations of God "have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret".⁴⁹ During the time of Their Dispensation, moreover, each One of Them is the depository of the "Most Great Infallibility."⁵⁰ Bahá'u'lláh thus explains this important concept:

*Know that the term 'Infallibility' hath numerous meanings and divers stations. In one sense it is applicable to One Whom God hath made immune from error. Similarly it is applied to every soul whom God hath guarded against sin, transgression, rebellion, impiety, disbelief and the like. However, the Most Great Infallibility is confined to One Whose station is immeasurably exalted beyond ordinances or prohibitions and is sanctified from errors and omissions. Indeed He is a Light which is not followed by darkness and a Truth not overtaken by error. Were He to pronounce water to be wine or heaven to be earth or light to be fire, He speaketh the truth and no doubt there be about it; and unto none is given the right to question His authority or to say why or wherefore.*⁵¹

In even more powerful language Bahá'u'lláh states that "Whoso maketh the slightest possible difference between their persons, their words, their messages, their acts and names, hath indeed disbelieved in God."⁵²

Referring to the Station of Distinction of the Manifestations of God, on the other hand, Bahá'u'lláh writes that "[e]ach and everyone of them hath been the Bearer of a distinct Message," of a "divinely revealed Book"⁵³ and has demonstrated to humanity special qualities. This station

pertaineth to the world of creation, and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a dis-

*tinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation.*⁵⁴

In this station, the Manifestations of God are different from Each Other, yet according to the Bahá'í Writings, the process of revelation is an eternal phenomenon. Bahá'u'lláh explains that

*the manifestations of His Divine Glory and the Day Springs of eternal holiness have been sent down from time immemorial, and been commissioned to summon mankind to the One True God. That the names of some of them are forgotten and the record of their lives lost is to be attributed to the disturbances and changes that have overtaken the world.*⁵⁵

'Abdu'l-Bahá further explains that "... the kingdom of God is an ancient sovereignty . . . it is not an accidental sovereignty . . ."⁵⁶ and therefore there have always been Manifestations of God coming to mankind and there will always be. He goes on explaining that there have been Manifestations of God one thousand years ago, even more, because the radiance and bounty of God have always existed.

As we have tried to analyze through this essay, the Manifestations of God come One after the Other and all represent a further stage in the evolutionary process that Bahá'u'lláh calls "the chain of successive Revelation"⁵⁷ and Their

teachings are progressive. Bahá’u’lláh thus states:

Should the Word be allowed to release suddenly all the energies latent within it, no man could sustain the weight of so mighty a Revelation.

He adds:

*Their Revelation may be likened unto the light of the moon that sheddeth its radiance upon the earth. Though every time it appeareth, it revealeth a fresh measure of its brightness, yet its inherent splendour can never diminish, nor can its light suffer extinction.*⁵⁸

Even if They appear at different moments in the history of mankind, and notwithstanding the differences between Them, all the Manifestations of God manifest the names and attributes of God. Bahá’u’lláh writes that “they only differ in the intensity of their revelation and the comparative potency of their light.”⁵⁹ The Bahá’í Texts unequivocally explain that whoever does not believe in the unity of the Manifestations of God, does not believe in the oneness of God.

Notes

1. Balyuzi, *King of Glory* p. 7
2. Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* p. 156
3. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 49-50
4. Ibid, pp. 105-6
5. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Selections* p. 283
6. Ibid, p. 283
7. Ibid, p. 283
8. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 220
9. Ibid, pp. 297, 61, 361
10. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 105-6
11. Ibid, p. 49
12. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy* pp. 39-40
13. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* p. 56
14. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 341
15. Ibid, p. 341
16. Ibid, p. 366
17. Ibid, p. 411
18. Matt.7:16
19. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 79-80
20. Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* pp. 240-41
21. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* pp. 310
22. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* p. 61
23. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* p. 215
24. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* pp. 97, 375
25. Ibid, p. 466
26. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* p. 195
27. Bahá’u’lláh, cited in *Advent* p. 82
28. Mark 7:6-8
29. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* p. 56
30. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* p. 160
31. Ibid, pp. 74,66
32. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* pp. 173
33. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* p. 154
34. Ibid, pp. 151, 208, 151, 218
35. Ibid, p. 155
36. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 66-7
37. Ibid, p. 67-8
38. Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* p. 66
39. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* p. 146
40. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* p. 318
41. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Dr. Forel* p. 15
42. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 49
43. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 114
44. Bahá’u’lláh, cited in *World Order* p. 113
45. Matt.19:17
46. Bahá’u’lláh, *Proclamation* p. 57
47. Bahá’u’lláh, *Epistle* p. 41
48. John 5:19
49. Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* p. 152
50. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* p. 78
51. Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* p. 108
52. Ibid, p. 108. Bahá’u’lláh in another of His Writings calls it “Supreme Sinlessness” (*Prayers and Meditations* p. 100) cf. also *God Passes By* pp. 214, 219
53. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* pp. 59-60
54. Ibid, p. 79, 74
55. Ibid, p. 174, 52
56. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* p. 463
57. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* p. 74
58. Ibid, p. 79
59. Ibid, p. 48