

Reflections about the Greatest Name of God in the Bahá'í Faith

Wolfgang Klebel

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Alláh'u'Abhá
God the All-Glorious

Two things are remarkable about this Name of God which is used in the Bahá'í faith as a greeting and as the greatest name of God among many other names of God. This name and all the others are mentioned in the Bahá'í prayers. It is remarkable that the Bahá'í faith has many prayers used and written down by the Manifestations themselves and given to the faithful for their use. Contrary, in Christianity, there is only one prayer given by Christ to the believers, the Lord's prayer.

The first surprising fact is that this name of God has two parts, while most other names of God consist of only one concept, often in superlative form like All-Knowing or Most Merciful. This is remarkable as the oneness or unity of God, religion, and mankind are essential principles in the Bahá'í Faith.

The other is the similarity and difference between this name of God and the name of the Manifestation of God, the prophet founder of the Bahá'í faith, Bahá'u'lláh. His name is the reverse of the name of God.

Alláh'u'Abhá versus Bahá'u'lláh
(Where Abhá is the superlative of Bahá)
God of All Glory versus Glory of God
(Name of God) (Name of Bahá'u'lláh).

1. Two words used in the Name of God

We will consider first the name and its dual nature, consisting of two concepts, two words where the second word, glory, seems to be a description or an apparent grammatical limitation of the first word. Yet, these two concepts are not indicating limitations; they are two different viewpoints from which God is approached. As shown below, God cannot be known, being

unknowable, but he can be approached personally in two ways, because He has approached us and spoken to mankind through His Manifestations and is known in His creation.

Alláh'u'Abhá
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The importance of this name is evident because Bahá'ís are bidden to repeat this name 95 times every day as a devotional act, and this name is used as a greeting by many Bahá'ís when they meet. Since the other names of God are one concept only connected with the adverb all or most, like the All-Wise, or Most Glorious, indicating a superlative, in this name we have next to the concept of God, of the Ultimate or Divine, the concept of Glory connected forming this name. This indicates to this writer that when using this name, we need to look at two aspects of the Ultimate reality, of God, as they are revealed to us, so the duplication is only in the recipient of the revelation, not in the originator of the revelation, not in God who is and can be called being one. Actually, God is even beyond the concept of one.

According to the Bahá'í Faith, God is beyond all attributes, beyond all possible descriptive concepts, and is therefore totally unknowable; these two aspects expressed in this name do not say anything about God but only about how God is revealed to us. God is beyond the idea and concept of numbers, as Bahá'u'lláh stated in prayer when he said that attributing oneness or unity to God is idle imagination.

And if I attempt to describe Thee by glorifying the oneness of Thy Being, I soon realize that such a conception is but a notion which mine own fancy hath woven, and that Thou hast ever been immeasurably exalted above the vain imaginations which the hearts of men have devised.¹

Surprisingly, Bahá'u'lláh calls the oneness of God here a vein imagination while he talks about the oneness of God himself in many other verses. Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that when talking about the oneness of God, the oneness of the Manifestations and their message of God is meant, here talking about the essence of God, any number is inapplicable, because God is neither one nor two or three or even infinite, which means a never-ending sequence of numbers. He is beyond anything that can be numbered or counted.

In a prayer, Bahá'u'lláh reveals these two ways of approaching God.

*Glory be to Thee, O Thou Who art the Lord of all beings and the Ultimate Aim of all creation! I testify with the tongue of both mine inner and outer being that Thou hast revealed and manifested Thyself, that Thou hast sent down Thy verses and demonstrated Thy proofs, and that Thou art independent of anyone besides Thee and sanctified above all else except Thyself.*²

God is approached in this prayer as the One who is the Ultimate Aim of creation and is independent and sanctified of anyone besides Himself. The reason the believers can pray to Him is that He has manifested Himself and sent down verses and proofs of Himself in all His Revelations creating all the major monotheistic religions of this world, which are, according to Bahá'í belief, the different historical levels of the One Religion of God.

The devoted supplicant dedicates this prayer in two ways, with the inner and outer being. Again, the outer being refers to the verses and proofs of God's revealing Himself in the Manifestations, and the inner being responds to God as the Ultimate, Independent, and Unknowable. God is beyond any knowing and cannot be known, as stated by the Báb, the prophet forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, and frequently mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh as well.

*I have known Thee by Thy making known unto me that Thou art unknowable to anyone save Thyself. I have become apprised by the creation Thou hast fashioned out of sheer nonexistence that the way to attain the comprehension of Thine Essence is barred to everyone. Thou art God, besides Whom there is none other God. No one except Thine Own Self can comprehend Thy nature. Thou art without peer or partner. From everlasting Thou hast been alone with no one else besides Thee and unto everlasting Thou wilt continue to be the same, while no created thing shall ever approach Thine exalted position.*³

The most crucial and essential thing that can be said about God is that He is unknowable. That He cannot be known. This means that whatever it takes for man to know something, does not apply to God. We cannot talk about what God is, what His attributes and appearances might be, what He looks like or is like, no comparison, no category of knowing applies to God.

The next thing the Báb says is that only God can know Himself; no other existing entity or person can understand him; for everybody else, He is absolutely unknowable. All we can say about God is the fact that He created this world, our reality, and all beings of the world, including

ourselves as human beings, as the Báb mentioned in the above verse. So, we can say that there is God, but even when we say that, we do not know what being or existing means when applied to God, because when we say God is, or God exists, we immediately have to correct this fact by saying, we know not at all what it means that God is, and have to explain this by saying we only know that God exists, but His existence is nothing like any kind of being or existence attributed to anything in this world or to human beings, so we must say that God is even beyond any idea or understanding of being, or of existence and of meaning.

What is implied by the word from everlasting unto everlasting is the fact that God is beyond space and time; those concepts are meaningless in relation to God, who is beyond anything that man can know. It must be clear that God cannot be called eternal either, because this concept implies a never-ending time, and God is beyond anything related to time; time is a creation of God. So, when we say God sends Manifestations to the world in time, that is to understand in the same way: He is sending Manifestations into the space and time of this world, not from another world or another time, not from anywhere or in any time, but from the unknowable God.

The name God, or Allah or all the other names of God in different languages indicates the transcendence of God, this being beyond everything knowable, often this superlative is attributed to God, and this includes the idea that God is all-encompassing, that all reality is related to God by being created by God, The term glory, the other word used in the name of God will become clear when recognizing that the name of the Manifestation of God is called the Glory of God and this will show the other aspect or viewpoint from which humans can approach God.

2. Name Reversal with Manifestation: God of All-Glory versus Glory of God

All of this must be considered when we use the name of God when we talk about God and try to think about God. But there is something else about God that can be known and of equal importance. It is the fact that God speaks to humankind, that God talks to man, not only collectively but individually, and that God creates the whole universe, especially man, and is demonstrating the Glory of God. Being created means not only created in the beginning but this creative process is continuing, and God is always the creator, who keeps his creation in existence. That is implied

in the book of Genesis, where God the creator is described literally talking to Adam and Eve, a rather primitive and simplistic description of this fact.

Additionally, that man can hear when God speaks is implied by the statement in the book of Genesis that man is created in the image of God. Therefore, it can be said that the writings of all the founders of the major world religions claim that God has spoken and that the Manifestations of God have pronounced and written down these Words of God. Most specifically, in the Gospel of John, Jesus, being a Manifestation of God, is specifically called the Word of God. (John 1:1)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.

In our context this can be explained as stating that the Word, actually every word, even the ability to talk, to think, and to use reason, is from God, and therefore the Word can be called being God and that the Manifestation of God, like Jesus, can be called the Word as well, because through him do we hear God speaking to the world. What is true for Jesus is, in the Bahá'í understanding, true for all Manifestations of God.

It is interesting to note that in the older books of revelation, God directly is described as speaking to the Manifestation like Adam or Moses, because in the understanding of these ages, that means the same then what is more exactly expressed in the more recent revelation that the word of the Manifestation is the Word of God and therefore, the Manifestation can be called the Word of God.

Concluding this explanation, we can now say that the Name of God as presented in the Bahá'í Writings is given in two words, God, and Glory, and to understand that these two aspects of our understanding of God are always present and are always to be considered together. God connected with Glory; these two words are all we know about God. The word “God” describes the unknowable God we only know by knowing He is unknowable, as the Báb has stated. Glory is the other aspect of God, being the word directed to mankind, revealing the unknowable God. We need to know that these are two different ways of knowing. The first can be called the essential or substantial knowing, the abstract or logical knowing; this kind of knowing does not know about God, cannot say anything about God, who is and remains unknowable. This way of knowing can only be expressed in a theology of not knowing, in negative or apophatic theology. This theology

was present in all the Abrahamic religions, mostly by mystics, and is especially important in the Bahá'í Faith.

What is called positive theology deals with revelation, where God talks to mankind and tells us what we need to know about Him. This is not substantial thinking, but personal thinking. Ferdinand Eber (1882-1931), an Austrian schoolteacher and philosopher developed this distinction between the two ways of knowing. He described personal knowing as the knowing from “I” to the “Thought,” from “me to you,” and substantial knowing from “I” to the “It,” from me to things. When I tell you about myself, you know something personal about me, something that all objective knowing about you cannot make me know. No scientific study, no psychological test can tell me that. No neurological test either. What is known one way, cannot be known the other way; they are basically different ways to know. Consequently, according to Ebner, the word leading from the “I” to the “Thought” constitutes spirituality and is the personal way of communicating. That God speaks to man and reveals Himself to humanity is called Bahá, Glory. This is the revelation of God to humankind. This is the personal opening from God to man, talking and revealing, what he needs to know to make his own life meaningful and to walk on the path of God, as Jesus said about the way to God.

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (John 14:6).

Through the Manifestation, God talks to man to give humanity the way to God, to the Father, as Jesus said. There is no substantial or essential knowledge of God; there is only personal knowledge because there is communication opened up by the unknowable God telling mankind what we need to know to find the way to God, and the Manifestations of God are this way, by following their words and scriptures the believer is saved, is on the way to God. Another important issue is the fact that when you tell me something personal about yourself, I do not know, but I can believe you, so the response to personal communication is a belief, not a knowledge.

It is this writer's opinion that any attempt of trying to know the unknowable God will lead to atheism because whatever we believe to know about God, whatever a person, proud of their knowledge of God, thinks to be true, is wrong. Whenever people put God into this world, reduce God to something known in time and space or even related to time and space, and judge him with our standards, we will find this kind of “god” is false, and we have to negate him, becoming an “a-

theist”. True religion is not theism; it is the knowledge that God is unknowable. Yet, there is the expectation that God talks to us, that we are the listener of His words, and therefore believers in the Glory of His revelation. True religion is, therefore, not theism; it is actually a-theism, but a different a-theism, an a-theism that confesses to knowing that God is unknowable and only can be known in believing the Word of God in the Manifestation, who is the Word of God.

And this consideration is the reason that leads us to the other issue about the similarity of the name of the founder prophet of the Bahá’í Faith, the name Bahá’u’lláh. Bahá’u’lláh is called the Glory of God because he is the revelation of God, and further, as the Gospel of John and Bahá’u’lláh said, he made all things, consequently, the whole of creation is here included. When God’s name is “God of All- Glory,” logically, the human being, the Manifestation, receiving this Glory is then called the Glory of God. And all believers in this revelation are called Bahá’ís, which means believers in this Glory of God. In the following verse of Bahá’u’lláh, this is said beautifully in the pictures of the universe being adorned by this Glory of creation and the word or a breath from God enfolding or clothing all beings, all created reality with sanctity and glory. This is described as sanctity, as being created in the image of God and being and expressing the Glory of God.

A drop of the billowing ocean of His endless mercy hath adorned all creation with the ornament of existence, and a breath wafted from His peerless Paradise hath invested all beings with the robe of His sanctity and glory⁴

According to the Bahá’í Faith, all Manifestations are one, and in every new Manifestation, all previous Manifestations are present. Therefore, Bahá’u’lláh is called Gory of God because in His Manifestation, this truth has been revealed for the first time, and God’s new name also expresses this truth. This is the importance of this name in the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. The Gospel of John (17:5) reports a statement of Jesus implying the same when Jesus said that the Glory of God is with him in His eternal existence and is expressed in His upcoming crucifixion and ascend to God.

And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was.

This name expresses all that can be known about God; in the substantial kind of knowing, we know that God is the Unknowable; when we know this, we know God in the personal way of

knowing by the fact that God has made Himself known in His Creation and in the revelation given to mankind. Every Manifestation, therefore, is the Glory of God, because the All-Glorious God has spread out this Glory throughout the whole world, through His Manifestations.

3. Conclusions

The name of God as used in Bahá'í greetings and as prayer reveals the mystical quality of the Bahá'í revelation. In this name, both aspects are revealed: God is totally unknowable and is beyond all and any way of being known by this creation. He is only known by Himself, as the Bahá'í writings repeatedly remind us. In a way, we could even say He is beyond everything we call beyond; he is beyond the beyond, transcendent over everything that can be known, and therefore he is beyond human judgment and understanding.

It is interesting to note that all world religions have a founding prophet who speaks in the name of God, reveals God's words, and can be called to be God's word. The Bahá'í writings tell us they are all one and the same person in this capacity of revealing the Word of God. They are different in their humanity, but one in their Divine mission.

Since God is unknowable, science cannot tell us anything about God, and neither can the question is there a God or not, be decided by science. Science is the development of substantial thinking, and since God is only known in his revelation, in his opening up to our belief and understanding, belief and trust in God is a personal matter.

Jesus stated that we need to become like little children to enter God's kingdom. Our belief in God must be like that of a child who believes, and trusts, but cannot understand his parents. Only this will open up our relationship with God and allows us to listen to the words of God.

At the same time came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And Jesus called a little child unto him, and set him in the midst of them, And said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom, of heaven. (Matt 18:1)

This is the trust in the Glory of God evident in God's creation and in the words and deeds of His Manifestations. When we are asked to repeat this name of God many times, these

considerations should fill our mind; understanding what God means to us and what believing in God reveals can give us a universal and catholic feeling and strength to overcome all tests and difficulties a believer may encounter. Additionally, repeating this name will open us up to stand in awe before the unknowable God, who can be described as embracing His creation from beyond while simultaneously being most intimate with this world. By the fact that God has created and is sustaining this world from the inside and outside or rather from beyond what can be called inside or outside. Meaning that God is the most transcendent and is beyond any transcendency, and He is the most intimate and is beyond any intimacy with His creation. At the same time, we must realize that this God cannot be identified with this world. Neither theism, which attempts to be able to know God, nor atheism, which thinks God cannot exist, is the right way to approach God.

Only accepting the human impotence to know God and the human need to accept the word of God in our hearts will put us on the way to God. We need to listen to the creation of God and understand ourselves as created by God to speak to God in prayer. We must stretch out our minds and must try to follow these metaphorical descriptions of somebody who cannot be described. Trying to believe in something that cannot be known or conceived.

As Bahá'u'lláh has stated in His prayer.

Magnified, O Lord my God, be Thy Name, whereby the trees of the garden of Thy Revelation have been clad with verdure, and been made to yield the fruits of holiness during this Springtime when the sweet savors of Thy favors and blessings have been wafted over all things, and caused them to bring forth whatsoever had been preordained for them in the Kingdom of Thine irrevocable decree and the Heaven of Thine immutable purpose. I beseech Thee by this very Name not to suffer me to be far from the court of Thy holiness, nor debarred from the exalted sanctuary of Thy unity and oneness.

*Ignite, then, O my God, within my breast the fire of Thy love, that its flame may burn up all else except my remembrance of Thee, that every trace of corrupt desire may be entirely mortified within me, and that naught may remain except the glorification of **Thy transcendent and all-glorious Being**. This is my highest aspiration, mine ardent desire, O Thou Who rulest all things, and in Whose hand is*

*the kingdom of the entire creation. Thou, verily, doest what Thou choolest. No God is there beside Thee, the Almighty, the All-Glorious, the Ever-Forgiving.*⁵

Notes

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, "Prayers and Meditations"

<https://oceanlibrary.com/link/jfBJk/prayers-and-meditations-by-bahauallah>

In this paper all writings of the Divine Manifestations of God are placed in Italics to distinguish them from other quotes in the text.

² Bahá'u'lláh, "Additional Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh"

<https://oceanlibrary.com/link/Bg6Ft/additional-prayers-revealed-by-bahauallah>

³ The Báb, "Selections from the Writings of the Báb"

<https://oceanlibrary.com/link/bERHx/selections-from-the-writings-of-the-bab>

⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, "Tablet of Unity, Lawh-i-Tawhid"

<https://adibmasumian.com/link/BT9Px/translations/lawh-i-tawhid/>

⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, "Prayers and Meditations"

<https://oceanlibrary.com/link/nZJmr/prayers-and-meditations-by-bahauallah>