



If we take some of the key attributes and actions of God, we can find parallel passages in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Qur'án, the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible.

There is but one God

For example, the scriptures of all four religions are emphatic with regard to the unity of God. There is but one God:

- a. Bahá'u'lláh
- b. Qur'án
- c. New Testament
- d. Hebrew Bible

God witnesseth that there is no God but Him, the Gracious, the Best-Beloved.<sup>4</sup>

My tongue, and My heart, and My inner and My outer being testify that there is no God but Him, that all others have been created by His behest, and been fashioned through the operation of His Will. There is none other God but Him, the Creator . . .<sup>5</sup>

There is no god but He: that is the witness of God, His angels and those endued with knowledge . . . There is no god but He the Exalted in Power the Wise.<sup>6</sup>

Allah hath said: Choose not two gods. There is only One God. So of Me, Me only, be in awe.<sup>7</sup>

Your God is One God; there is no God save Him, the Beneficent, the Merciful.<sup>8</sup>

And cry not unto any other god along with God. There is no God save him. Everything will perish save His countenance.<sup>9</sup>

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments [is], Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord.<sup>10</sup>

As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol [is] nothing in the world, and that [there is] none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) But to us [there is but] one God, the Father, of whom [are] all things, and we in him.<sup>11</sup>

Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts; I [am] the first, and I [am] the last; and beside me [there is] no God.<sup>12</sup>

I [am] the Lord, and [there is] none else, [there is] no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me: That they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the west, that [there is] none beside me. I [am] the Lord, and [there is] none else.<sup>13</sup>

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God [is] one Lord.<sup>14</sup>

## God the Creator

Perhaps the aspect of the concept of God that distinguishes it most from the Ultimate Reality in the Eastern religions is that God is regarded as the Creator of this phenomenal world:

- a. Bahá'u'lláh
- b. Qur'án
- c. New Testament
- d. Hebrew Bible

All-praise to the unity of God, and all-honour to Him, the sovereign Lord, the incomparable and all-glorious Ruler of the universe, Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation, and Who, rescuing His creatures from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction, hath received them into His kingdom of incorruptible glory.<sup>15</sup>

Say: God is the Creator of all things! He is one! the Almighty!<sup>16</sup>

Praise be to God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth . . . who multiplies in creation what He wills; for God has power over all things.<sup>17</sup>

And the four beasts . . . rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, the four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.<sup>18</sup>

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness [was] upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light . . . And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which [were] under the firmament from the waters which [were] above the firmament: and it was so . . . And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry [land] appear: and it was so.<sup>19</sup>

## God the All-Powerful

Similarly, God is declared to be All-Powerful in these scriptures:

- a. Bahá'u'lláh
- b. Qur'án

c. New Testament

d. Hebrew Bible

Regard thou the one true God as One Who is apart from, and immeasurably exalted above, all created things . . . He Who is the Eternal Truth is the one Power Who exerciseth undisputed sovereignty over the world of being.<sup>20</sup>

God testifieth to the unity of His Godhood and to the singleness of His own Being . . . He is supreme over His servants, and standeth over His creatures. In His hand is the source of authority and truth. He maketh men alive by His signs, and causeth them to die through His wrath. He shall not be asked of His doings and His might is equal unto all things. He is the Potent, the All-Subduing. He holdeth within His grasp the empire of all things, and on His right hand is fixed the Kingdom of His Revelation. His power, verily, embraceth the whole of creation. Victory and overlordship are His; all might and dominion are His; all glory and greatness are His. He, of a truth, is the All-Glorious, the Most Powerful, the Unconditioned.<sup>21</sup>

Lo! power belongeth wholly to God. He is the Hearer, the Knower.<sup>22</sup>

Whoso desireth power (should know that) all power belongeth to God.<sup>23</sup>

To God belongeth all that is in the heavens and on earth . . . He forgiveth whom He pleaseth and punisheth whom He pleaseth. For God hath power over all things.<sup>24</sup>

Say: 'O God! Lord of Power (and Rule) thou givest Power to whom Thou pleasest and Thou strippest off power from whom Thou pleasest; thou enduest with honour whom thou pleasest and thou bringest low whom Thou pleasest; in Thy hand is all Good. Verily over all things thou hast power.<sup>25</sup>

To God doth belong the dominion of the heavens and the earth and all that is therein and it is He who hath power over all things.<sup>26</sup>

After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as [it is] in heaven . . . For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.<sup>27</sup>

Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed [it], Why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? [What] if God, willing to show [his] wrath, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of wrath fitted to destruction.<sup>28</sup>

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.<sup>29</sup>

Thine, O LORD, [is] the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all [that is] in the heaven and in the earth [is thine]; thine [is] the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honour [come] of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand [is] power and might; and in thine hand [it is] to make great, and to give strength unto all.<sup>30</sup>

Say unto God, How terrible [art thou in] thy works! through the greatness of thy power shall thine enemies submit themselves unto thee. All the earth shall worship thee, and shall sing unto thee; they shall sing [to] thy name. Selah. Come and see the works of God: [he is] terrible [in his] doing toward the children of men. He turned the sea into dry [land]: they went through the flood on foot: there did we rejoice in him. He ruleth by his power for ever.<sup>31</sup>

God the All-knowing

There are many attributes of God described in the the Qur'an, the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible. Here we will just give one as an example.

- a. Bahá'u'lláh
- b. Qur'an
- c. New Testament
- d. Hebrew Bible

. . . the one true God knoweth all things, perceiveth all things, and comprehendeth all things . . .<sup>32</sup>

God knoweth whatsoever is in the heavens and whatsoever is in the earth, and that God is Knower of all things<sup>33</sup>

For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things.<sup>34</sup>

God understandeth the way thereof, and he knoweth the place thereof. For he looketh to the ends of the earth, [and] seeth under the whole heaven.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of these close similarities we may feel justified in considering that Bahá'u'lláh taught the same view of God that is to be found in the scriptures of the Abrahamic line of religions.

#### 1b. The Manifestation as God

The above position regarding the nature of the Ultimate Reality may be called the theistic position. There does, however, exist a variant on the theistic position. There has existed within the Bahá'í community, from its very early days, a small minority who view Bahá'u'lláh as God. Thus, although these people support the theistic description of Ultimate Reality, they differ from position 1a above in considering that this description applies also to Bahá'u'lláh. This view can be backed

up by a number of statements in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. Referring to his own advent, Bahá'u'lláh says:

The Quintessence of Glory hath lifted up its voice above My head, and crieth from such heights as neither pen nor tongue can in any degree describe: 'God is my witness! He, the Ancient of everlasting days is come, girded with majesty and power. There is none other God but Him, the All-Glorious, the Almighty, the All-Highest, the All-Wise, the All-Pervading, the All-Seeing, the All-Informed, the Sovereign Protector, the Source of eternal light!'<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, in the following passage:

Let thine ear be attentive, O Nabíl-i-A`zam, to the Voice of the Ancient of Days, crying to thee from the Kingdom of His all-glorious Name. He it is Who is now proclaiming from the realms above, and within the inmost essence of all created things: 'I truly am God, there is none other God but Me. I am He Who, from everlasting, hath been the Source of all sovereignty and power, He Who shall continue, throughout eternity, to exercise His kingship and to extend His protection unto all created things. My proof is the greatness of My might and My sovereignty that embraceth the whole of creation.'<sup>37</sup>

In addition, Bahá'u'lláh, in numerous places, appeals to the fact that the advent of God Himself has been prophesied in various scriptures. Regarding the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh says:

He Who heralded this Revelation hath declared: 'He shall proclaim under all conditions: "Verily, verily, I am God, no God is there but Me, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting."<sup>38</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh also refers to certain prophecies made by the Prophet Muhammad and by the Imam 'Alí in an oration which is called the Tutunjíyyah.

What explanation can they give concerning that which the Seal of the Prophets (Muhammad) . . . hath said?: 'Ye, verily, shall behold your Lord as ye behold the full moon on its fourteenth night.' The Commander of the Faithful (Imám 'Alí) . . . moreover, saith in the Khutbiy-i-Tutunjíyyih: 'Anticipate ye the Revelation of Him Who conversed with Moses from the Burning Bush on Sinai.'<sup>39</sup>

There are many similar and even more explicit statements in untranslated tablets. For example in the Súrat al-Asháb there is the statement by Bahá'u'lláh, referring to himself, as the nafs (self) of God<sup>40</sup> and in the Súrat al-Qamís as the Beauty of the All-Merciful in a human temple.<sup>41</sup>

There is evidence that there were some who held this view even during Bahá'u'lláh's own lifetime. Thus for example the following line of poetry is attributed to Nabíl-i-A`zam:

Men say that Thou art God, and I am moved to anger, remove the veil and submit no longer to the disgrace of [mere] Godhead!<sup>42</sup>

It is also evident that the existence of this view was the source of disagreement among the Bahá'ís of Bahá'u'lláh's time, since Bahá'u'lláh wrote about it in a tablet to Sayyid Jamal-i-Burujirdi (see below).

It should be pointed out that this position is not incompatible with position 1a. Believing that Bahá'u'lláh was God does not preclude also accepting the theistic statements describing God given in section 1a above.

This position identifies the Bahá'í Faith with other religions that also regard their founder as identical to God. In Christianity, since the Councils of Nicea in 325 ce and of Constantinople in 379 ce, the orthodox position has regarded Christ as being of one substance (homoousios) with God. In the Vaishnavite sects of Hinduism, Krishna and Rama are regarded as avatars (incarnations) of the god Vishnu.

## 2. The Monist View/Absolute Reality

The view of God held in the Abrahamic religions necessitates a differentiation between human beings and God. The human being stands apart from God. The reality of God is absolutely different from and can have no part in the human reality. Indeed in most of the Abrahamic religions it would be considered heretical to even suggest any identity between God and the human being. There are, however, a few statements of Bahá'u'lláh that must puzzle those who would maintain that Bahá'u'lláh's view of God is the same as that of the Abrahamic religions. Thus, for example, Bahá'u'lláh in places states that there is only one Absolute Reality.

Absolute existence is strictly confined to God, exalted be His glory.<sup>43</sup>

For the mere mention of any one of Thy creatures would in itself imply an assertion of their existence before the court of Thy singleness and unity. Such an assertion would be naught but open blasphemy, an act of impiety, the essence of profanity and a wanton crime.<sup>44</sup>

This view implies that there is only a single existent Reality – everything else having therefore only a relative reality. Indeed, in some passages it is suggested that any reality which anything other than God appears to have is illusory:

The world is but a show, vain and empty, a mere nothing, bearing the semblance of reality . . . Verily I say, the world is like the vapour in a desert, which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion.<sup>45</sup>

There are many other passages that imply that if we were to see

things as they really are, we would see only one reality, not the multiplicity of entities that we think exists.

It is clear to thine Eminence that all the variations which the wayfarer in the stages of his journey beholdeth in the realms of being, proceed from his own vision. We shall give an example of this, that its meaning may become fully clear: Consider the visible sun; although it shineth with one radiance upon all things, and at the behest of the King of Manifestation bestoweth light on all creation, yet in each place it becometh manifest and sheddeth its bounty according to the potentialities of that place . . .

In like manner, colours become visible in every object according to the nature of that object. For instance, in a yellow globe, the rays shine yellow; in a white the rays are white; and in a red, the red rays are manifest. Then these variations are from the object, not from the shining light. And if a place be shut away from the light, as by walls or a roof, it will be entirely bereft of the splendour of the light, nor will the sun shine thereon . . .

Thus when the wayfarer gazeth only upon the place of appearance – that is, when he seeth only the many-coloured globes – he beholdeth yellow and red and white; hence it is that conflict hath prevailed among the creatures, and a darksome dust from limited souls hath hid the world. And some do gaze upon the effulgence of the light; and some have drunk of the wine of oneness and these see nothing but the sun itself.<sup>46</sup>

Similarly, in the last of the Seven Valleys,

For when the true lover and devoted friend reacheth to the presence of the Beloved, the sparkling beauty of the Loved One and the fire of the lover's heart will kindle a blaze and burn away all veils and wrappings. Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend . . . This is the plane whereon the vestiges of all things (Kullu Shay') are destroyed in the traveller, and on the horizon of eternity the Divine Face riseth out of the darkness, and the meaning of 'All on the earth shall pass away, but the face of thy Lord . . .' is made manifest.<sup>47</sup>

In the religions of the world, the idea that this phenomenal world or at least the human reality is identical to the Ultimate Reality in some way can be found in many religions. It stands most clearly identified in the Advaita Vedanta where the assertion 'Tat tvam asi' (Thou art that) sums up the doctrine that the human reality is identical to the Ultimate Reality. It can also be seen to some extent in Buddhism where the deconstruction of physical reality through the principle of pratitya-samutpada (the interdependent, mutually-conditioned causal nexus) leaves Nirvana or Shunyata (voidness) as the only permanent reality. This is summed up in the Mahayana formula that 'Samsara (this phenomenal world) is Nirvana'.

This concept of the nature of the Ultimate Reality can be called monist since it considers that there is only one reality. It also differs from theism in that it considers the Ultimate Reality as an impersonal Reality void of any attributes. This Reality does not act in the world and cannot be said to possess those features that are typical of theism, such as intervening in the world or being pleased with certain human beings and angry with others.

### 3. Theism and Monism in the World's Religions

In the following discussion, the above positions will be referred to as positions 1 (the theistic tradition) and 2 (the monistic tradition), with position 1 being subdivided into 1a (strictly transcendent theism) and 1b (what may be called an immanent or incarnationist theism, i.e. one that holds that the Manifestation of God is God).

This question of the nature of Ultimate Reality has been an important one in religious history. It has been the cause of speculation and also of disputes both within religious communities and between them. Within most world religions, examples can be found of those who adhere to both of the two major positions outlined above.

Within Hinduism, a difference exists between those who follow the Bhakti traditions (position 1) and those who adhere to the Advaita Vedanta (position 2). While the Bhakti tradition represents position 1b, insofar as Krishna and Rama are considered avatars (incarnations) of the god Vishnu, this does not exclude a certain element of position 1a, particularly in the Rig Veda.

In Buddhism the situation is somewhat complex. The concept of Ultimate Reality is conveyed by either the term Dharma (describing the Ultimate Reality as a universal law) or the term Nirvana (describing the Ultimate Reality as a state). In Theravada Buddhism where Nirvana predominates, the question of whether the human being who attains to Nirvana is then one with Nirvana or not the Buddha refused to answer, describing the answer as *avyakata* (inexpressible). Mahayana Buddhism has a concept of the *Trikaya* (the three bodies possessed by all Buddhas): the *Dharmakaya* (the transcendental ultimate reality which is identical to the law; it is timeless, permanent and devoid of characteristics), the *Sambhogakaya* (the body of the heavenly Buddhas) and the *Nirmanakaya* (the earthly body in which the Buddhas appear to humanity). In the Pure Land Schools this becomes a more definite movement towards position 1 with devotion to and worship of Amida Buddha as the path to enlightenment and liberation. In other schools, such as Zen, there is more of an inclination towards position 2, with the concept that each person's reality is *busho* (Buddha-nature) which is in turn identical to *hossho* (Dharma-nature) and Ultimate Reality (*Shunyata* or *ku*, emptiness).

In Judaism, the majority follow a theistic tradition (position 1a) but position 2 is to be found in the writings of certain Jewish mystics such as the authors of the *Sefer Yesira* (3rd century ce) and the *Zohar* (13th century).

In Christianity, the majority follow position 1b in that they hold that Jesus Christ is God. In Christian history, however, there has been a significant minority that have rejected that interpretation of the New Testament and have adhered to position 1a. These include the Arians in the 4th century ce, the Socinians in the 16th–17th centuries and the Unitarians in the 18th to 20th centuries. Christian mystics such as the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Meister Eckhart have tended towards position 2.

In Islam, the orthodoxy of both Sunni and Shi`i Islam has been of a strictly transcendent theism (position 1a). There has been some tendency towards position 1b among a small number of Shi`i sects, which have always been regarded by the majority as heretical. As with Judaism and Christianity, position 2 is mainly to be found among Muslim mystics. Examples include al-Hallaj, who is reputed to have been executed for his assertion of identity with the Ultimate Reality; `aná al-Haqq` (I am the Absolute Reality), and the followers of the school of Ibn al-`Arabi, who hold to the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujúd* (oneness of Being).

#### The Resolution of Differences

We can see from the above that this question of the nature of the Ultimate Reality has caused division and even conflicts in the world's religions. Bahá'u'lláh claims to introduce the era of religious unity and harmony:

The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. Suffer it not to become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity.<sup>48</sup>

This claim necessitates some resolution of this question of the nature of the Ultimate Reality which has divided religions in the past. Such a resolution can take the form of affirming one viewpoint at the expense of others, using a dialectical manoeuvre to resolve the matter at a higher level or introducing a new concept. In fact Bahá'u'lláh tackles the question in five ways which encompass these three possible ways of resolving the conflict about the Ultimate Reality.

#### Resolution by Affirmation

One aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's approach to this question of the Ultimate Reality is that he affirms in various places the truth of each of these positions. There are numerous statements in the Bahá'í writings affirming the theistic concept of God. Several of these are quoted

under position 1a above.

Position 1b that the Manifestation of God is God is also affirmed in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh:

Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: 'I am God!' He verily speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto.<sup>49</sup>

Statements by Bahá'u'lláh supporting the monist position are given under position 2 above. 'Abdu'l-Bahá also states in his commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I was a Hidden Treasure . . . ' that the monist position is a true position (see below).

Resolution by Apophasis

The second way in which Bahá'u'lláh resolves this question of the nature of Ultimate Reality is by denying that human beings can ever adequately describe or comprehend the Ultimate Reality.

To every discerning and illuminated heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the Divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men . . . No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness. No sign can indicate His presence or His absence; inasmuch as by a word of His command all that are in heaven and on earth have come to exist, and by His wish, which is the Primal Will itself, all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the realm of being, the world of the visible.<sup>50</sup>

Even the prophets of God are unable to comprehend the nature of God, much less human beings:

All the Prophets of God and their chosen Ones, all the divines, the sages, and the wise of every generation, unanimously recognize their inability to attain unto the comprehension of that Quintessence of all truth, and confess their incapacity to grasp Him, Who is the inmost Reality of all things.<sup>51</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation of this point is that comprehending something means encompassing it; and that which is encompassed must therefore be less than that which does the encompassing. Since human beings are by definition less than God, they are unable to comprehend God.

Then how could it be possible for a contingent reality, that is, man, to understand the nature of that pre-existent Essence, the Divine Being? The difference in station between man and the Divine Reality is

thousands upon thousands of times greater than the difference between vegetable and animal. And that which a human being would conjure up in his mind is but the fanciful image of his human condition, it doth not encompass God's reality but rather is encompassed by it. That is, man graspeth his own illusory conceptions, but the Reality of Divinity can never be grasped: It, Itself, encompasseth all created things, and all created things are in Its grasp. That Divinity which man doth imagine for himself existeth only in his mind, not in truth. Man, however, existeth both in his mind and in truth; thus man is greater than that fanciful reality which he is able to imagine.<sup>52</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá likens this to the relationship between plants and animals, and between animals and human beings. In other words, it is impossible for a lower order of being to ever comprehend a higher order.

Also the difference of conditions in the world of beings is an obstacle to comprehension. For example, this mineral belongs to the mineral kingdom; however far it may rise, it can never comprehend the power of growth. The plants, the trees, whatever progress they may make, cannot conceive of the power of sight or the powers of the other senses; and the animal cannot imagine the condition of man – that is to say, his spiritual powers. Difference of condition is an obstacle to knowledge; the inferior degree cannot comprehend the superior degree. How then can the phenomenal reality comprehend the Preexistent Reality?<sup>53</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá also states that the knowledge human beings have can only ever be knowledge of the attributes of a thing and never knowledge of its essence. This would imply that only a knowledge of the attributes and not of the essence of God could be possible for human beings.

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.

As our knowledge of things, even of created and limited things, is knowledge of their qualities and not of their essence, how is it possible to comprehend in its essence the Divine Reality, which is unlimited? For the inner essence of anything is not comprehended, but only its qualities. For example, the inner essence of the sun is unknown, but is understood by its qualities, which are heat and light. The inner essence of man is unknown and not evident, but by its qualities it is characterized and known. Thus everything is known by its qualities and not by its essence. Although the mind encompasses all things, and the outward beings are comprehended by it, nevertheless these beings with regard to their essence are unknown; they are only known with regard to their qualities.

Then how can the eternal everlasting Lord, Who is held sanctified from comprehension and conception, be known by His essence? That is to

say, as things can only be known by their qualities and not by their essence, it is certain that the Divine Reality is unknown with regard to its essence and is known with regard to its attributes.<sup>54</sup>

And yet, even this knowledge of attributes does not really apply to our knowledge of God. Human beings, as phenomenal reality, can only comprehend the pre-existent attributes of the Ultimate Reality to the extent to which their human capacities allow.

This knowledge of the attributes is also proportioned to the capacity and power of man; it is not absolute . . . For the phenomenal reality can comprehend the Preexistent attributes only to the extent of the human capacity.<sup>55</sup>

In a passage addressed to God, Bahá'u'lláh states that it is impossible for human beings to comprehend the real meaning of the names and attributes that have been ascribed to God. Although we may think we know what these words mean, that meaning relates only to this world and has no meaning in relation to God:

Lauded and glorified art Thou, O Lord, my God! How can I make mention of Thee, assured as I am that no tongue, however deep its wisdom, can befittingly magnify Thy name, nor can the bird of the human heart, however great its longing, ever hope to ascend into the heaven of Thy majesty and knowledge.

If I describe Thee, O my God, as Him Who is the All-Perceiving, I find myself compelled to admit that They Who are the highest Embodiments of perception have been created by virtue of Thy behest. And if I extol Thee as Him Who is the All-Wise, I, likewise, am forced to recognize that the Well Springs of wisdom have themselves been generated through the operation of Thy Will. And if I proclaim Thee as the Incomparable One, I soon discover that they Who are the inmost essence of oneness have been sent down by Thee and are but the evidences of Thine handiwork. And if I acclaim Thee as the Knower of all things, I must confess that they Who are the Quintessence of knowledge are but the creation and instruments of Thy Purpose.

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine Essence. For whatever such strivings may accomplish, they never can hope to transcend the limitations imposed upon Thy creatures . . .<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the ascribing of names and attributes to God in the holy scriptures does not give us any positive information about God; it merely gives us negative information. The ascribing of the attribute 'loving' to God does not mean that we know anything about the love of God – for our understanding of 'love' cannot be compared to God's love; this ascription merely conveys to us the

information that lack of love is an imperfection and God is free of all imperfections. (It also acts, therefore, as a guidepost to what attributes we should try to acquire.)

Nevertheless, we speak of the names and attributes of the Divine Reality, and we praise Him by attributing to Him sight, hearing, power, life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections. When we look at the existing world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection; therefore, we say that the sanctified Essence of God is wisdom. Weakness is imperfection, and power is perfection; consequently, we say that the sanctified Essence of God is the acme of power. It is not that we can comprehend His knowledge, His sight, His power and life, for it is beyond our comprehension; for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension. If the attributes are not identical with the Essence, there must also be a multiplicity of preexistences, and differences between the attributes and the Essence must also exist; and as Preexistence is necessary, therefore, the sequence of preexistences would become infinite. This is an evident error.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that in order for human beings to comprehend God, they would require another faculty which they do not possess. Therefore such comprehension is inherently impossible.

For to comprehend the state and the inner mystery of that Essence of Essences, that Most Secret of Secrets, one needs must have another power and other faculties; and such a power, such faculties would be more than humankind can bear, wherefore no word of Him can come to them.

If, for example, one be endowed with the senses of hearing, of taste, of smell, of touch – but be deprived of the sense of sight, it will not be possible for one to gaze about; for sight cannot be realized through hearing or tasting, or the sense of smell or touch. In the same way, with the faculties at man's disposal it is beyond the realm of possibility for him to grasp that unseeable Reality, holy and sanctified above all the sceptics' doubts.<sup>58</sup>

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the most that can be said is that this Ultimate Reality exists but nothing further can be said of it.

But that Essence of Essences, that Invisible of Invisibles, is sanctified above all human speculation, and never to be overtaken by the mind of man. Never shall that immemorial Reality lodge within the compass of a contingent being. His is another realm, and of that realm no understanding can be won. No access can be gained thereto; all entry is forbidden there. The utmost one can say is that Its existence can be proved, but the conditions of Its existence are unknown.<sup>59</sup>

It is for this reason that human beings have had and can have no success in trying to obtain any comprehension of God.

That such an Essence doth exist, the philosophers and learned doctors one and all have understood; but whenever they tried to learn something of Its being, they were left bewildered and dismayed, and at the end, despairing, their hopes in ruins, they went their way, out of this life.<sup>60</sup>

For these reasons Bahá'u'lláh states that a confession of an inability to know God represents the acme of human understanding.

. . . thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man's development.<sup>61</sup>

#### Resolution through Relativism

If then, according to the Bahá'í scriptures, Ultimate Reality cannot be known, what of the various conceptions of Ultimate Reality that are described in the first section of this paper? 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that these are merely products of the human imagination.

This people, all of them, have pictured a god in the realm of the mind, and worship that image which they have made for themselves. And yet that image is comprehended, the human mind being the comprehender thereof, and certainly the comprehender is greater than that which lieth within its grasp; for imagination is but the branch, while mind is the root; and certainly the root is greater than the branch. Consider then, how all the peoples of the world are bowing the knee to a fancy of their own contriving, how they have created a creator within their own minds, and they call it the Fashioner of all that is – whereas in truth it is but an illusion. Thus are the people worshipping only an error of perception.<sup>62</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh also considers that the various notions and conceptualizations of Ultimate Reality that human beings have formed are all the products of the human mind and are, therefore, subjected to its limitations:

So perfect and comprehensive is His creation that no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man's finite mind and are conditioned by

its limitations.<sup>63</sup>

O Salmán! All that the sages and mystics have said or written have never exceeded, nor can they ever hope to exceed, the limitations to which man's finite mind hath been strictly subjected.<sup>64</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh goes on to make the important point that these conceptualizations of Ultimate Reality are reflections of what is in the human mind:

To whatever heights the mind of the most exalted of men may soar, however great the depths which the detached and understanding heart can penetrate, such mind and heart can never transcend that which is the creature of their own conceptions and the product of their own thoughts. The meditations of the profoundest thinker, the devotions of the holiest of saints, the highest expressions of praise from either human pen or tongue, are but a reflection of that which hath been created within themselves, through the revelation of the Lord, their God.<sup>65</sup>

In his commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I was a Hidden Treasure . . .', 'Abdu'l-Bahá examines this question of 'that which hath been created within themselves'. He looks at the theistic and monistic viewpoints and then puts forward a reason for the difference between the two. He proposes that the difference between these two viewpoints should be seen not in terms of their disagreeing about the nature of Ultimate Reality but rather in terms of their looking at Ultimate Reality from different viewpoints. In other words, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is suggesting that the truth regarding the Ultimate Reality is relative to the viewpoint of the individual. We may put this in several different ways:

That the nature of the Ultimate Reality is not a question of trying to discern what is the universal truth but rather what is each individual's truth.

That this question of the nature of the Ultimate Reality is not like mathematics where one can derive a definitive answer but rather like the question of beauty where each person has his or her own viewpoint about what is beautiful and what is not.

That the question of the nature of the Ultimate Reality is like two people looking at a complex object from two different sides; each sees and describes the object from his or her particular viewpoint and these descriptions will be different and may even be contradictory.

That the viewpoint of each person is coloured in a particular individual way and that affects the way that he or she sees reality. Each person therefore 'sees' a different reality from every other person.

That although an individual may understand more than one

different viewpoint, each understanding can only be expressed within the framework of that viewpoint and may not make sense if one tries to understand it from the framework of another viewpoint.

We can thus say that each religion builds up a picture of the cosmos that is reality for the adherents of that religion, a universe of discourse that is completely coherent and non-contradictory for those who live within that framework. For those who live within each universe, statements made by other religions appear false and contradictory. There is however no independent platform from which we can judge one picture of reality, one universe of discourse, one set of truth-claims against the others. We must either choose to live within one universe or else adopt the Bahá'í viewpoint that sees each as a viewpoint on the truth but not the complete truth.

In his commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I was a Hidden Treasure . . .', 'Abdu'l-Bahá has also given an outline of the cause for variation between human beings (that is to say, the cause of there being different viewpoints on reality). 'Abdu'l-Bahá starts his explanation from the statement made by Bahá'u'lláh that although everything in the universe reflects some of the attributes of God, it is only the human being who has the potential to reflect all of the names and attributes of God.

Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focussed the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favour, so enduring a bounty.<sup>66</sup>

While every human being has the potential of manifesting all of the divine attributes, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that, in fact, each particular person has a different emphasis in the extent to which he or she manifests these attributes. In each person one attribute tends to dominate over the others. Those persons in whom the attributes 'sanctity' (taqdís) and 'purity' (tanzíh, freedom from defilement) predominate tend to view God as being completely separate from and different from the phenomenal world; they, therefore tend towards the theistic view. Those persons in whom the attribute 'lordship' predominates tend to view God and the phenomenal world as an interrelated entity, for there can be no lordship attributed to God without something that He is Lord over; these therefore tend towards the monist viewpoint. Thus, according to this exposition of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the view that each person takes of reality is determined by the composition of that person's psyche (taking this word in its original meaning of the mind-soul).

However although he [the human being] is the dawning-place of the

manifestation of all the Names and Attributes, one of the Divine Names is manifested most strongly and appears most intensely [in each person]. Thus his being originates from this Name and returns to it. The summary of the matter is that some of the saints of God, since they have seen the rays of the light of the Eternal Beauty with the eye of perpetuity in the heights of transcendence [tanzíh, freedom from defilement, purity] and the heaven of sanctity [taqdís], praise and sanctify the Essence of Absolute Unity above all of the stages [shu'únát] that pertain to the world. For in the being of these heavenly figures, the Names of 'Sanctity' and 'Transcendence' have shone forth. And some of the knowers of the Hidden Secrets are the manifestations of the names 'Divinity' and 'Lordship'. Thus it is that in this station, they do not see the Lord of Lords without His subject creatures, nor the Creator without a Creation, nor the All-Knowing without an object of knowledge.<sup>67</sup>

Expressed in relation to the themes being considered in this paper, this becomes the assertion that the conceptualization of the nature of the Ultimate Reality that each person holds is a reflection of the composition of the psyche of that person; therefore any statements about the nature of Ultimate Reality can only be statements relative to the person who makes the statement, since they are only true when seen from that particular viewpoint.

Thus it matters little whether one conceptualizes the Ultimate Reality in the anthropomorphic way that most theistic paths have or in a manner that is devoid of attributes which is the way that most monistic paths have; both conceptualizations are correct from a particular viewpoint and incorrect from another viewpoint. As described above, the theistic concept that gives attributes to the Ultimate Reality is correct insofar as the ascribing of attributes to the Ultimate Reality is an assertion of the lack of imperfection in that Reality but it is incorrect if we imagine that it tells us anything positive about that Reality. Similarly, the fact that the Ultimate Reality as conceptualized by monist paths as devoid of attributes is correct insofar as human beings are incapable of comprehending any attributes that are ascribed to the Ultimate Reality but it is incorrect if it implies a nihilist approach to the Ultimate Reality.

The truth regarding the Ultimate Reality is, therefore, according to the position taken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, relative to the psyche-soul of the individual. This may be described as a position of cognitive relativism regarding the nature of the Ultimate Reality. Indeed, taking into consideration a number of other statements by Bahá'u'lláh regarding the inability of human beings to comprehend the nature of the rational soul,<sup>68</sup> the spiritual world<sup>69</sup>

and other matters, it can be said that this concept of cognitive relativism applies generally to all metaphysical or ontological statements. It is important to note that this position is only one of

cognitive relativism (a relativism about what one can know) and not one of ontological or metaphysical relativism (a relativism about the structure or nature of existence itself).

It is possible that this resolution through a cognitive relativism is what is indicated by a statement made by Bahá'u'lláh in the Seven Valleys. In describing the last of the Seven Valleys, the Valley of True Poverty and Absolute Nothingness, Bahá'u'lláh refers to the theistic and monistic conceptualizations of the nature of the Ultimate Reality using two phrases that became synonymous with these two positions in Islamic mystical philosophy. Bahá'u'lláh refers to the Oneness of Being (wahdat al-wujúd) and Oneness of Manifestation (wahdat al-shuhúd). The former is the phrase associated with the monist school of Ibn 'Arabí (d. 638 ah/1240), while the latter phrase was coined by Ibn 'Arabí's fierce critic Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindí (971 ah/1563–1034/1624–5) to represent the theistic position. Bahá'u'lláh states that when one reaches this Valley, 'the wayfarer leaveth behind him the stages of the "oneness of Being and Manifestation" and reacheth a oneness that is sanctified above these two stations'.<sup>70</sup>

The resolution of the conflict between monism and theism through cognitive relativism can be said to be 'a oneness that is sanctified above these two stations', a dialectical movement that transcends the two positions.<sup>71</sup>

Resolution through the Concept of the Manifestation of God (The Specific Manifestation of God).

Examples of statements in the Bahá'í scriptures supporting both the monist and theist positions have been given above. It should be noted, however, that just as the concept of cognitive relativism described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá implies that what appear to be two contradictory statements regarding the nature of Ultimate Reality may in fact be regarded as both correct, they may also be regarded as being both incorrect. Within their own framework of reference each is correct; within the opposite framework, they are incorrect. It may be for this reason that it is possible to find statements in the Bahá'í scriptures that appear to refute these two positions also.

The theistic concept of God outlined in 1a is, for example, refuted by Bahá'u'lláh when he denies the validity of ascribing attributes to God (see below) and is also refuted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.<sup>72</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh refutes the position of those who maintain an identity between the Manifestation and God (position 1b) in a number of passages in which he differentiates between the Essence of God and the Manifestation of God<sup>73</sup> and Shoghi Effendi also clearly refutes this position.<sup>74</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá refutes the monist position (position 2) in his talk reported in Some Answered Questions.<sup>75</sup>

This apparent refutation of each of the three positions on the

Ultimate Reality can, however, be seen in another light. The writings of Bahá'u'lláh disclose a very different way of resolving the differences among these metaphysical positions. In brief, it can be said that Bahá'u'lláh resolves the fact that different religious groups come to these very different conclusions about the nature of Ultimate Reality by denying that any of these three viewpoints has any relationship to the Ultimate Reality itself and stating that all three are, in fact, statements about the manner in which the Ultimate Reality manifests itself.

With regard to position 1a, for example, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that all pathways to the Ultimate Reality, whether that of mystics (*adh-dhákírún*) or of the learned (*al-`árifún*), are in reality pathways to the Manifestations of God. More specifically, Bahá'u'lláh denies that either the pathway of the mystic (*yadhkaraka*) or that of learning and esoteric knowledge (*ya`raja ilá hawá' `irfánika*) yields knowledge of Ultimate Reality; it yields knowledge only of the Manifestation.

The loftiest sentiments which the holiest of saints (*adh-dhákírún*) can express in praise of Thee (*yadhkaraka*), and the deepest wisdom which the most learned of men (*al-`árifún*) can utter in their attempts to comprehend Thy nature (*ya`raja ilá hawá' `irfánika*), all revolve around that Centre Which is wholly subjected to Thy sovereignty, Which adoreth Thy Beauty, and is propelled through the movement of Thy Pen [i.e. the Manifestation of God].<sup>76</sup>

Bahá'u'lláh states that even such attributes as 'Godhead, Divinity, Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence', which we would normally think of only in relationship to the Ultimate Reality, are in fact attributable to the Manifestations of God.

. . . viewed from the standpoint of their oneness and sublime detachment, the attributes of Godhead, Divinity, Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence, have been and are applicable to those Essences of being, inasmuch as they all abide on the throne of divine Revelation, and are established upon the seat of divine Concealment. Through their appearance the Revelation of God is made manifest, and by their countenance the Beauty of God is revealed. Thus it is that the accents of God Himself have been heard uttered by these Manifestations of the divine Being.<sup>77</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms this, stating that the only knowledge of God available to human beings is through knowledge of the Manifestations of God:

The knowledge of the Reality of the Divinity is impossible and unattainable, but the knowledge of the Manifestations of God is the knowledge of God, for the bounties, splendours and divine attributes are apparent in Them. Therefore, if man attains to the knowledge of the

Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God; and if he be neglectful of the knowledge of the Holy Manifestations, he will be bereft of the knowledge of God.<sup>78</sup>

Indeed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes the point by asserting that all attributions to God are in reality attributions to the Manifestation of God and that anything else that human beings may think they attribute to God is pure imagination.<sup>79</sup>

Accordingly all these attributes, names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation; and all that we imagine and suppose beside them is mere imagination, for we have no means of comprehending that which is invisible and inaccessible . . . From this it is certain and evident that if we imagine a Divine Reality outside of the Holy Manifestations, it is pure imagination, for there is no way to approach the Reality of Divinity which is not cut off to us, and all that we imagine is mere supposition.<sup>80</sup>

With regard to the monist position, this also is resolved by Bahá’u’lláh at the level of the Manifestation. In his Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality (Lawh-i Basit al-Haqíqa), Bahá’u’lláh describes and gives the traditional proofs for the two positions of Oneness of Being (wahdat al-wujúd) and Oneness of Manifestation (wahdat al-shuhúd) – (see above). He then goes on to state, much as in the quotations above, that ‘Absolute Reality is unknowable, unattainable, and invisible’ and that therefore ‘whatever wondrous references and powerful descriptions have appeared from the mouth and pen refer to the sublime Word [of God], the most exalted Pen, the primal Summit, the true Homeland, and the Dawning-place of the manifestation of mercy’. The Manifestation of God, ‘even though outwardly He is given a name and appears to be bound by limitations, is in His inner reality uncompounded (basít), sanctified from limitations. This uncompounded state is relative and attributive (idá’í wa nisbí) and not uncompounded in an absolute sense (min kull al-jihát).’<sup>81</sup>

One way of stating this position would be to say that all theistic statements in the scriptures of all religions that conceptualize a personal God who acts in the world (is angry with some humans and is pleased with others, for example) in fact refer to the person of the Manifestation of God, while all monistic religious statements that refer to an impersonal Reality in fact refer to the Primal Intellect (or Primal Will),<sup>82</sup> which is the first emanation from the Absolute Reality.<sup>83</sup>

Indeed, it would follow from the above argument that all attempts to conceptualize the Ultimate Reality, whether in monist or theist modes, in fact succeed, at best, in conceptualizing the Manifestation (whether personal or impersonal) of the Ultimate Reality. This position is underlined in Bahá’u’lláh’s interpretation of the scriptures and

religious writings of the past. With regard to the theist position, for example, there is the assertion that the one who spoke to Moses in the Burning Bush and who is known in the Hebrew Bible as yhwh (Jehovah) — i.e. the one who in the classical Jewish, Christian and Islamic interpretations of the Bible is considered to be God — is in fact Bahá'u'lláh.<sup>84</sup>

In describing the monist position, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives the analogy of the Absolute Reality as an ocean and phenomenal beings as waves of that ocean. Between the World of God and the World of Man, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that there is the World of Command which he says is 'the station of the Primal Will which is the Universal Reality and which becomes resolved into the innumerable forms [of all phenomenal beings].' That ocean from which the forms of phenomenal beings arise as waves (and which, as described above, the monists consider to be the Absolute Reality) is in fact the Primal Will and therefore exists at the level of the World of Command.<sup>85</sup>

In summary, then, we can say that what has in other religions been described as the Ultimate Reality, whether this be the theistic God of the western religions or the impersonal Absolute Reality (Brahman, Tao, Nirvana, Dharma) of the eastern religions, is in the Bahá'í Faith regarded as being true only at the level of Manifestation and not true descriptions of the Ultimate Reality itself. The Ultimate Reality stands beyond all these human attempts to describe it. The descriptions only refer to the secondary level of Manifestation (the level described below as Láhút).

### Operational Resolution

Bahá'u'lláh has also given what may be called an operational or practical resolution to this question. He has stated that, given that the truth is relative and that therefore both parties to this disagreement over the nature of the Ultimate Reality are correct from their viewpoint, there is no right or wrong answer to this question. Indeed the principle of unity overrides the question of being right or wrong over such metaphysical issues. Thus, for example, during Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime, as mentioned above, it seems that some of his followers may have written to him asking him about the correctness of the view expressed in position 1b above as against 1a. Bahá'u'lláh, in a tablet written to Sayyid Jamál Burújirdí, refers to the two views as: those who conceptualize the Absolute and person of the Manifestation without making any distinction (fasl) between the two; and those who recognize the person of the Manifestation as being but the appearance of God. Having referred to the issue, Bahá'u'lláh refrains from supporting one viewpoint over the other. Indeed, he states that:

These two positions are both acceptable before the throne of God. If, however, the supporters of these two positions should contend and quarrel with one another in their exposition of the two perspectives,

both groups are, and hath ever been, rejected. This inasmuch as the purpose of the spiritual understanding (‘irfán) and the exposition (dhikr) of the highest levels of the elucidation of the teachings is to attract the hearts, cause fellowship between souls, and further the propagation of the Cause of God. As a result of contention and disputation among those who hold to these two positions, there hath been and will ever result in the dissipation of the Cause of God and both groups shall return to hell-fire despite the fact that they, in their own estimation, soar in the highest horizon of spiritual understanding.<sup>86</sup>

This passage would seem to indicate that at the level of metaphysics, both viewpoints are valid aspects of the truth but at the operational level in the Bahá’í community the principle of unity is a ‘higher’ truth.

Bahá’u’lláh has also given an operational resolution to the conflict between the theistic and monistic positions in a tablet to Manakji, who was the agent in Iran of the Indian Zoroastrians. He wrote to Bahá’u’lláh through Mírzá Abu’l-Fadl Gulpáygání, who was working for him. Among the questions that he asked Bahá’u’lláh was one in which he outlines various religious positions held among the Hindus of India and asks for Bahá’u’lláh’s opinion regarding each of them. Among the positions described are monism and theism which are described thus:

One says that all the visible realms, from the atom to the sun, are identical with the Absolute Truth, and nothing can be seen save the Truth [i.e. monism]. Another asserts that the essence of the Necessarily Existent is the Absolute Truth, and prophets are mediators between God and the creation who serve to guide the people to the Eternal Truth [i.e. theism].<sup>87</sup>

Having described these positions (monism and theism respectively) and although asked to state which of them is correct, Bahá’u’lláh does not state that any of them is the truth. He states that arguments can be adduced for the truth of each position but he gives instead two operational resolutions. The first is to say that the second of the two positions (i.e. theism) is ‘closest to piety’. Within the Indian context of these words, this of course is true since the theistic Bhakti tradition is precisely that of piety and worship. The second operational resolution given by Bahá’u’lláh is that, in fact, all should follow the dictates of the injunction: ‘Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.’<sup>88</sup>

A further operational issue is addressed even more strongly by Bahá’u’lláh. In both the Tablet to Manakji broaching issues in Indian religious thought and in the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality addressing issues in Islamic mystical philosophy, Bahá’u’lláh takes a

very similar line. He begins by refraining from coming down on one side or the other of the metaphysical argument between monism and theism concerning the nature of the Ultimate Reality. He then goes on to assert that, in this day, the question of which side is right has been bypassed by the appearance of a new Manifestation of God. Anyone who fails to recognize this new Manifestation is wrong whichever side he or she takes in the issue. The following is taken from the Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality:

Furthermore this day is not the day for human beings to occupy themselves with understanding such expositions, for knowledge of this exposition and such like has not been and will not be conducive to making human beings self-sufficient (able to do without, detached, ghaní). For example, the philosopher who said these words, were he to be alive, and they who accepted what he said and those who opposed him over it, all of them would now be in one position. Every single one of them who, after the raising of the call of the King of Names from the right hand of the luminous spot, affirmed his belief, is accepted and praised, and all else are rejected . . .

If a soul were today to be all-knowledgeable about all the sciences of the world and yet hesitate in affirming its belief, it would not be mentioned in the Divine Presence and would be accounted among the most ignorant. The goal of the religious sciences is to attain knowledge of the Absolute Reality. Any soul that holds back from this most holy and most mighty adornment is recorded in the tablets as being of the dead.<sup>89</sup>

A similar passage occurs in the Tablet to Manakji:

Nevertheless, today a new Cause hath appeared, and a different discourse is appropriate . . . Today is not the day for questions. When thou hearest the call from the dawning-place of glory, say: 'I am coming, O God of the names and cleaver of the heavens! I bear witness that thou has become manifest and hath made manifest whatever Thou didst desire, as a command from thee. Verily, Thou art the Omnipotent, the All-Mighty.'<sup>90</sup>

Taken together with the relativism of metaphysical positions described above, the net effect of this approach by Bahá'u'lláh is to reduce the importance of metaphysics itself. From being key questions in religious discourse, metaphysical questions are relegated to the area of private opinion. In their place, practical questions take priority: first, the question of the recognition and acceptance of the Manifestation ('when thou hearest the call from the dawning-place of glory, say: "I am coming, O God"'); and second, the question of individual and social ethics ('be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and centre your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements').

## Knowledge of God

We may therefore divide up the question of the nature of the God of Bahá'u'lláh into two separate questions. The first concerns what God is and the second what we can know of God. Bahá'u'lláh's unequivocal response to the first question is that we can never know what God is. The nature of God is beyond the comprehension of the finite human mind.

The answer to the second question requires a much more detailed consideration. We can come to know something of God through the various ways in which God is manifested in the world. The rest of this paper is taken up with a description of the ways in which God is manifested in the world and what we can know of these levels of manifestation.

It has been traditional in Islamic metaphysics, which Bahá'u'lláh at times appropriated, to attempt to describe the levels of existence according to a particular nomenclature. These names are useful in assisting our conceptualization, as long as we do not assign to them too rigid a status as ontological absolutes. The highest level in this system of nomenclature is that of Háhút, which is the unmanifested Essence of God.

### The Unknown and Unknowable God, the Absolute Reality

Háhút The locus of Unseen and Unknown Essence of God is, in some places in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, stated to be the realm of Háhút. This realm is barred to human understanding and so no descriptions of God can be given here; God is in this realm only known by such negative phrases as 'the Hidden Treasure' and the 'Absolute Unknown'. The only affirmation that can be made of God in this realm is 'He/It' (huwa) – in other words, that no sentence can be constructed about this level of Reality. As soon as one starts to construct a sentence of description, 'He/It is . . .', one has revealed one's ignorance. In this realm the names and attributes are unmanifested and so only exist in potential form. Even the term 'oneness' (wáhidyya) cannot be attributed to God in this stage; only a unitary concept, the Primal Oneness (ahadiyya), can be said to subsist here.

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I was a Hidden Treasure . . .', the first stirrings of the coming into existence of the phenomenal world occur through a movement of love within the Hidden Treasure — for love necessitates an object that is loved. This movement within the Hidden Treasure takes the form of love for and knowledge of its own beauty reflected in the eternal archetypal forms (a'yán-i thábita) of all created things. This is the stage reflected in the first phrase of the Islamic Tradition: 'I was a Hidden Treasure and desired [loved] to be known . . .' It is also the first phrase of the Hidden Word of Bahá'u'lláh: 'I loved thy creation . . .'<sup>91</sup>

In this stage it is an unmanifested movement within the Hidden

Treasure, and the eternal archetypal forms, being merely phenomena within the divine consciousness, cannot yet be said to have come into existence. They merely subsist within the Hidden Treasure.

#### God Revealed in the Manifestation of God as Primal Will

Láhút The first emanation from the Unseen and Unknown Godhead is the Primal Will (mashiyyat-i awwal).

This is the beginning of the realm of Láhút, the realm in which the potentialities within the Divine Essence appear. It is the realm of 'He is He and there is none but He' – in other words, the only descriptions of Reality at this level that are valid refer back to this level. It cannot be likened to anything that is below it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that it cannot be said that the Divine Essence (Háhút) manifests itself since this would imply that it partakes of the existence of phenomenal things, that it is one thing appearing in many forms (the analogy being that of the ocean and the waves of the ocean). The Primal Will emerges by a process that can be called emanation, whereby the source does not resolve itself into phenomenal things (the analogy being that of the sun and the rays of the sun).<sup>92</sup>

But once the Primal Will has appeared, it then becomes the source of manifestation; it manifests itself at first in the divine names and attributes, and these in turn are manifested in a myriad forms through all levels of the phenomenal world.

In the religions and philosophies of the past, this stage of the Primal Will has been known as the Logos (Word of God). This corresponds to the First Intellect or Primal Mind (Nous or 'aql-i awwál)

in classical Neoplatonic philosophy. It is, in fact, this stage that most people think of when they use the word 'God' or 'Allah' or yhwh (Jehovah in Judaism). For when most people use these words, they are usually referring to an entity that is acting in the world: is sending prophets or messengers, is giving laws, is angry with human beings for breaking the holy law or pleased with human beings because of their obedience. Those aspects of these words that relate to this entity acting in the world (being Creator, Beneficent, Wrathful, etc.) or those aspects that imply a personal relationship between that entity and individual human beings relate to this level, to the realm of Láhút.

Such actions and names, as we have seen, cannot be attributed to the 'Hidden Treasure' (Háhút). They must apply to the stage at which the Primal Will emanates from the 'Hidden Treasure' and manifests itself. In Bahá'í terminology, this primal emanation from the Hidden Treasure is called, among other epithets, Tongue of Grandeur, the Most Exalted Pen and the Lord of Lords. This realm is named the All-Glorious (Abhá) Horizon, the Heavenly Court or the Throne of God.

The very expression 'Manifestation of God' which occurs in the Bahá'í writings referring to the founders of the world's religions reveals the nature of the God to which reference is being made. The God

that is being ‘manifested’ by the Manifestation of God cannot be the ‘Hidden Treasure’ (Háhút), since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that that level of

the divinity does not manifest itself — it only emanates the Primal Will. The God that is being manifested by the Manifestations of God is the God that appears at the second level of Lahút, i.e. the Primal Will. It is this that manifests itself. Thus for example the Báb writes:

If, however, thou art sailing upon the sea of creation, know thou that the First Remembrance, which is the Primal Will of God, may be likened unto the sun. God hath created Him through the potency of His might, and He hath, from the beginning that hath no beginning, caused Him to be manifested in every Dispensation through the compelling power of His behest . . . It is this Primal Will which appeareth resplendent in every Prophet and speaketh forth in every revealed Book. It knoweth no beginning, inasmuch as the First deriveth its firstness from It; and knoweth no end, for the Last oweth its lastness unto It.

In the time of the First Manifestation the Primal Will appeared in Adam; in the day of Noah It became known in Noah; in the day of Abraham in Him; and so in the day of Moses; the day of Jesus; the day of Muhammad, the Apostle of God; the day of the ‘Point of the Bayán’; the day of Him Whom God shall make manifest; and the day of the One Who will appear after Him Whom God shall make manifest. Hence the inner meaning of the words uttered by the Apostle of God, ‘I am all the Prophets’, inasmuch as what shineth resplendent in each one of Them hath been and will ever remain the one and the same sun.<sup>93</sup>

It is clear from this passage that the Báb regards the Primal Will as the inner (highest) reality operating within the Manifestations of God. The God that the Manifestations of God are manifesting is the divinity at the level of Láhút, the Primal Will. It is interesting to note that in this passage, the Báb says that ‘the First Remembrance [i.e. the Manifestation of God] . . . is the Primal Will of God’. Similarly Bahá’u’lláh says, ‘The Eternal Truth is now come.’<sup>94</sup> The Manifestation of God is identified with God at this level of Láhút. It is for this reason that Bahá’u’lláh states that: ‘Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: “I am God!” He verily speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto.’<sup>95</sup>

The Ultimate Reality in its impersonal aspects at this level of Láhút is designated in the concepts of the Cloud of Unknowing (in Christian mysticism), al-Haqq (the Absolute Reality, in Islamic mysticism), Brahman (in Hinduism), Nirvana or Dharmakaya (in Buddhism) or the Tao (in Taoism). Certainly some aspects of the use of such terms as the Cloud of Unknowing, al-Haqq, Brahman, Nirvana or the Tao may well correspond to the Hidden Treasure, the Unmanifested Essence, Háhút. But insofar as these concepts are made the goal of human endeavour (i.e. that human beings strive to reach this entity or realize their oneness

with this entity), they are operating at the level of Manifestation, at the level of the Primal Will, Láhút. This is the source of manifestation and hence the source of all being and therefore the point of origin towards which human beings seek to return.

The Manifestations of God, at this level, exist in their meta-historical role as messengers of God and saviours of humanity. This is the station in which the Manifestations are one reality. They exist as the agents that carry out the decrees of God. This is the level at which Bahá'u'lláh says that we should make no difference among them. At this level they are one reality. Because of their existence at this level, anyone of them can say that they are another or that they are the return of another Manifestation:

These Manifestations of God have each a twofold station. One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity. In this respect, if thou callest them all by one name, and dost ascribe to them the same attribute, thou hast not erred from the truth. Even as He hath revealed: 'No distinction do We make between any of His Messengers!' (Qur'an 2:285) For they one and all summon the people of the earth to acknowledge the Unity of God, and herald unto them the Kawthar of an infinite grace and bounty. They are all invested with the robe of Prophethood, and honoured with the mantle of glory. Thus hath Muhammad, the Point of the Qur'án, revealed: 'I am all the Prophets.' Likewise, He saith: 'I am the first Adam, Noah, Moses, and Jesus.' . . . Sayings such as this, which indicate the essential unity of those Exponents of Oneness, have also emanated from the Channels of God's immortal utterance, and the Treasuries of the gems of divine knowledge, and have been recorded in the scriptures . . . Thus He saith: 'Our Cause is but one.' (Qur'an 54:50) Inasmuch as the Cause is one and the same, the Exponents thereof also must needs be one and the same.<sup>96</sup>

God Revealed in the Manifestation of God – The World of Command

Although the Essence of God, the Hidden Treasure, does not manifest itself, we have seen above that, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Primal Will, the first emanation from the Hidden Treasure, does manifest itself in all phenomenal entities. These phenomenal entities are, however, then graded into a spiritual hierarchy of being.

Jabarút This the Realm of Decree or Command. It is the intermediary level. This is the level at which God's Command (amr) and Decree (qadá') are created and from where they are sent to earth. In some religions the agents of God at this level who carry out the commands of God are described as archangels. Thus, for example, in Islamic angelology, Gabriel is the carrier of the revelation, 'Izrá'íl is the angel of death and Isráfíl the one who announces the Day of Resurrection. It is the first level at which substantiation (taqyíd) occurs – in other words, this is the highest level to which something that is contingent and substantial can

attach itself.<sup>97</sup>

Apart from their trans-historical presence at the level of Láhút, each of the Manifestations of God has a specific mission, a commission or command (amr) that it is his historical purpose to fulfil.

This specific mission is relative to the needs and exigencies of the time in which each appears. Bahá'u'lláh describes this second aspect of the station of the Manifestation thus:

The other is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct 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 . . .

It is because of this difference in their station and mission that the words and utterances flowing from these Well-springs of divine knowledge appear to diverge and differ.<sup>98</sup>

It is also stated that the human spirit, when it reaches the highest point in its spiritual development, enters the realm of Jabarút. This is God's ultimate goal and desire for human beings:

Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things . . . And My purpose in all this was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion [Jabarút] and become worthy of My invisible bestowals.<sup>99</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá also states that this level of Jabarút is the highest level that the human soul can attain.

[It is the] light of lights, the secret of secrets, the Sidrat al-Muntahá (the farthest tree), the highest degree, the loftiest focal point, the farthest place of prostration (masjid al-aqsa), the uttermost limit in the realm of creation. And since there is neither a beginning nor an end to perfections nor any limit, so well is it with the one who enters this holy, blessed and mighty place.<sup>100</sup>

#### God Revealed in Human Nature

Malakút This is the angelic kingdom. The Bahá'í scriptures acknowledge the existence of angelic spirits that can influence the affairs of this world. Human beings are capable of attaining this world and are then said to be angelic in nature. Thus this angelic realm can be thought of as representing the penultimate step in human development.<sup>101</sup> This is the level at which God's Decrees and Commands, created at the level of Jabarút, are carried out.<sup>102</sup>

Developing the line of thought in the section on relativism above,

we may say that since no knowledge of the Ultimate Reality is attainable and each person conceptualizes the Ultimate Reality from his or her own viewpoint, then each person's conceptualization is, in a sense, more a reflection of that person's reality than of the Ultimate Reality. This position states in effect that whenever a person points out and seeks to describe the vision that she or he has of the Ultimate Reality, that process of pointing in fact is reflected back at the individual and what she or he has in fact described is her or his own reality.

The argument runs a full circle, however, since the Bahá'í scriptures also assert, as stated above, that human beings uniquely are capable of manifesting all of the divine attributes. This reflection of the reality of an individual is also, therefore, a reflection of the Ultimate Reality. Thus whether a person conceptualizes reality in theist or monist mode, this is ultimately a reflection of the divine attributes manifested within him. That, of course, is another way of stating the position that 'Abdu'l-Bahá takes, as described above, that the conceptualization of the Ultimate Reality which any individual makes is governed by which of the divine names and attributes are manifested most strongly in him.

The above line of thought takes us on to another statement found in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh: that to try to understand the Ultimate Reality involves understanding ourselves:

O My servants! Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves – a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being.<sup>103</sup>

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Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh states that the purpose of whatever has appeared in the scriptures of the past in the way of injunctions to extol God is in fact only a way of assisting human beings to gain a better knowledge of their own selves:

Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.<sup>104</sup>

'Abdu'l-Bahá in his commentary on the Islamic Tradition 'I was a Hidden Treasure . . .' also alludes to this principle. He likens the situation to the point at the centre of a compass. No matter how far human beings may journey on their spiritual quest, he says, they are only journeying around this point. They can never escape the implications of this fact: that the most that they can hope to achieve

is a better knowledge of the manifestation of the divine attributes within themselves. He also, however, goes on to say that this divine reality within the human being is concealed and requires the education of the Manifestations of God to reveal it and cause it to shine forth.

For however much detached minds and pure souls seek to penetrate the worlds of Inner Knowledge, their understanding will never penetrate more than that station which is a sign pointing towards the Monarch of Primal Oneness which He has placed as a trust within the reality of man. And however much they may fly with triumphant wings in the limitless space of what is knowable and observable, they will read naught but the letters of the book of their own selves. Thus it is that He has said: 'Read your own book, your self is sufficient to give an account against you today.' [Qur'án 17:14] For example, consider a circle; however much a compass moves, it can only move around the point which is the centre of the circle. This illumined verse, in the reality of angelic souls, has the same role as that point, for all of the senses and understanding of man revolve around that divine verse. But this verse, shining forth from the Sun of essence, this trust from the Monarch of Primal Unity is hidden and concealed within the veils and clouds of the self just as the luminous flame is hidden and concealed invisible within the candle or lamp before it is lit. And so while this light of the firmament of Unity is concealed beneath the horizon of the reality of man, no one is aware of the divine states which are hidden beneath of the reality of man.<sup>105</sup>

#### God Revealed in Nature

Násút This is the physical world. Bahá'u'lláh confirms the assertions of the nature mystics that God is also revealed in the physical world. By contemplating nature, it is possible to come to a knowledge of God:

I am well aware, O my Lord, that I have been so carried away by the clear tokens of Thy loving-kindness, and so completely inebriated with the wine of Thine utterance, that whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.<sup>106</sup>

Eventually the mystic traveller reaches the stage where everything brings God to his mind and heart:

Then will the manifold favours and outpouring grace of the holy

and everlasting Spirit confer such new life upon the seeker that he will find himself endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind. He will contemplate the manifest signs of the universe, and will penetrate the hidden mysteries of the soul. Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leadeth him to the stations of absolute certitude. He will discover in all things the mysteries of divine Revelation and the evidences of an everlasting manifestation.107

#### Ways of Looking at the Relationship of God to the Creation

Although we have above given a five-fold division of reality, from Háhút to Násút, in the Bahá'í scriptures, this is not the only way of conceptualizing reality. Bahá'u'lláh writes that human beings cannot really comprehend anything about the spiritual world, even the reality of the soul that is within the human being cannot be comprehended by human beings.108

Since we have no way of gaining any absolute knowledge of the spiritual world, we must content ourselves with a series of images that convey to us some of the truths of that realm. With regard to the question of the relationship between God and the creation, there is a series of images of ever-increasing complexity. It is not that any one of these images is more true than the other but rather that each is more useful in particular circumstances than others.

#### Single Reality

The simplest picture that can be found in the Bahá'í writings is that there is a single reality in existence. This is the monist view described above. In summary it may be recapitulated that this single reality is God, that existence belongs solely to God and all other entities have but a contingent reality. This is the realm of the Sufi saying, quoted by Bahá'u'lláh with approval: ‘ “God was alone; there was none else besides Him.” He, now, is what He hath ever been.’109

#### Dual Reality

This view is that reality is best conceptualized as consisting of God and His creation. It is the essential form of dualism, as described above: ‘God was, and His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning . . .’110

#### Three-fold Reality

The Bahá'í scriptures insert between the level of God and that of the creation a third level, that of the `álam -i malakút (world of the Kingdom – see quotation below) or `álam al-amr (world of command, Kingdom of his Cause or world of revelation – see opening verse of the Kitáb-i Aqdas). This is the level of the Manifestations of God. As implied above, the insertion of this realm and

the application to it of all of those descriptions reserved in other religions for God or for the Absolute Reality is a distinctive feature of the Bahá'í Faith.111

The Prophets, on the contrary, believe that there is the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of Creation: three things. The first emanation from God is the bounty of the Kingdom, which emanates and is reflected in the reality of the creatures, like the light which emanates from the sun and is resplendent in creatures; and this bounty, which is the light, is reflected in infinite forms in the reality of all things, and specifies and individualizes itself according to the capacity, the worthiness and the intrinsic value of things.112

#### Five-fold Reality

The schema described above – that of realms from Háhút to Násút – constitutes a five-fold gradation of reality. Here, the world of command in the previous scheme may be subdivided into Láhút and Jabarút,113 while the world of creation is Násút, the physical universe. Malakút, wherein reside the souls of saintly human beings, is sometimes related to the world of command and sometimes to the world of creation.

#### Manifold Realities

Even these five levels of reality are susceptible to further subdivisions. There are references in Bahá'u'lláh's writings to seven stages of creation (takwín): will (mashiyyat), purpose (irádh), predestination (qadar), fate (qada), implementation (imdá), destiny (ajal) and record (kitáb).114 The realm of Násút is also subdivided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá into four levels: mineral, vegetable, animal and human.115

#### Conclusion

Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed as one of his goals religious harmony and the removal of religious differences:

The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife. The religion of God and His divine law are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men.116

Gird up the loins of your endeavour, O people of Bahá, that haply the tumult of religious dissension and strife that agitateth the peoples of the earth may be stilled, that every trace of it may be completely obliterated. For the love of God, and them that serve Him, arise to aid this sublime and momentous Revelation. Religious fanaticism and hatred are a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench. The Hand of Divine power can, alone, deliver mankind from this desolating affliction.117

The differences concerning the nature of the Ultimate Reality have

been a great source of disagreement and conflict in the history of religion. In this paper, we examine the two major viewpoints on this question, monism and theism, and we divide theism into its two major schools: classic theism and incarnationist theology. Bahá'u'lláh resolves this discord at a number of levels:

At the first level, Bahá'u'lláh simply affirms the truth of the major viewpoints on the nature of the Ultimate Reality.

The second level is Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that human beings have finite minds and are therefore inherently unable to comprehend the Ultimate Reality, which is infinite.

At the third level, Bahá'u'lláh states that, although the absolute truth is unknowable, each individual is capable of seeing a portion of the truth, an aspect of the truth that depends on the viewpoint of that individual; it reflects, in fact, the nature of that individual; it is a truth that is relative to each individual. The Bahá'í scriptures state that since human beings reflect all of the divine names and attributes, the truth that each individual reflects depends, therefore, on these divine attributes. Each individual human being reflects some of the divine attributes more strongly than others and it is this variation that is the source of the variation in the way that individuals view Ultimate Reality.

At the fourth level, Bahá'u'lláh resolves the previous levels by his assertion that, in fact, all conceptualizations of the Ultimate Reality refer not to the Ultimate Reality itself but to the manifestation of that Reality, whether it is a manifestation in the form of a person who is the Manifestation of God or the impersonal manifestation of the Primal Will which resolves itself into the inner reality of all created things.

The fifth way in which Bahá'u'lláh resolves this issue is at the practical or operational level. At this level the consideration of unity overrides all other considerations; it is the supreme operating principle in the Bahá'í Faith. Since there are, in any case, no right or wrong answers to this question of the nature of Ultimate Reality, the 'correct' resolution is the one that preserves unity. Although metaphysical questions have been important in religious history and have been the cause of much religious conflict, Bahá'u'lláh's second operational resolution of this problem is to downplay the importance of metaphysics itself and to raise the acquisition of virtues to the central position in religion. Because of the relativism of metaphysical truth, metaphysics becomes an area for private opinion and not for dogma imposed by the religious authorities. Being correct over metaphysical matters is no longer of primary concern, indeed it is no longer even a possibility.

The path that Bahá'u'lláh has laid out involves first the

recognition of the Manifestation of God – for spiritual growth can only occur through following the teachings of the Manifestation; and second, the path of a high standard of personal ethics and service to society. These are the standards by which human beings are to be judged in the religion of Bahá'u'lláh, not by their orthodoxy or their religious knowledge.

The first and foremost duty prescribed unto men, next to the recognition of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, is the duty of steadfastness in His Cause. Cleave thou unto it, and be of them whose minds are firmly fixed and grounded in God. No act, however meritorious, did or can ever compare unto it. It is the king of all acts, and to this thy Lord, the All-Highest, the Most Powerful, will testify . . .

The virtues and attributes pertaining unto God are all evident and manifest, and have been mentioned and described in all the heavenly Books. Among them are trustworthiness, truthfulness, purity of heart while communing with God, forbearance, resignation to whatever the Almighty hath decreed, contentment with the things His Will hath provided, patience, nay, thankfulness in the midst of tribulation, and complete reliance, in all circumstances, upon Him. These rank, according to the estimate of God, among the highest and most laudable of all acts. All other acts are, and will ever remain, secondary and subordinate unto them . . .118

Thus, we may describe Bahá'u'lláh's project as that of creating a metareligion – a religion that encompasses and provides a theoretical framework within which it is possible to see the truth of all religion. To the contradictory truth-claims of the various religions of the world, he does not assert the truth of any particular metaphysical position but rather responds in two stages. The first stage is the relativist statement that religious metaphysical truth is an individual truth which each person sees from his or her own viewpoint. The second stage is to deny that metaphysics itself is the core of religion. Although throughout the history of religion, religions have tended to define themselves in terms of certain metaphysical positions, Bahá'u'lláh denies that this is either the central point or purpose of religion. Religion is for the purpose of advancing human spirituality through the acquisition of virtues and of advancing human civilization through the achievement of greater degrees of unity. Whatever advances these goals is true religion. If metaphysical positions lead to disunity and conflict then they are the very opposite of true religion.

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Bahá'u'lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 41–2. ?

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Bahá'u'lláh, Áthár Qalam A`lá, vol. 4, p. 38. ?

Cited in Browne, Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion, p. 346n. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 81, p. 157. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations, p. 91. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 153, pp. 328–9.

Cf. ‘This present life is even as a swelling wave, or a mirage, or drifting shadows . . . Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out.’ `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, no. 150, pp. 177–8. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Seven Valleys, pp. 18–21. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Seven Valleys, pp. 36–7. Passage in quotation marks is from Qur'an 55:26–7. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 110, p. 215. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 178. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 98. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, p. 99. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, p. 47. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 221. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 220–1. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 221. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 1, pp. 3–4. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, pp. 148–9. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, p. 54. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, p. 54. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, p. 54. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 83, pp. 165–6. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections, pp. 53–4. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 26, p. 62, emphasis added. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 148, p. 317. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 148, pp. 317–18. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 27, p. 65. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Makátíb, vol. 1, pp. 41–2. A provisional translation of this passage in `Abdu'l-Bahá's commentary can be found in Momen, ‘`Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: “I was a Hidden Treasure”,’ p. 29. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings, no. 83, pp. 164–5. ?

no. 79, p. 152. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys*, p. 39. ?

For a further consideration of this question, see Momen, 'Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics'. ?

'Abdu'l-Bahá gives, for example, the standard theistic description of God as the 'living, almighty, self-subsisting, eternal Being' and then denies that this is a description of God: 'There is also the divine unity or entity, which is sanctified above all concept of humanity. It cannot be comprehended nor conceived because it is infinite reality and cannot become finite. Human minds are incapable of surrounding that reality because all thoughts and conceptions of it are finite, intellectual creations and not the reality of Divine Being which alone knows itself. For example, if we form a conception of Divinity as a living, almighty, self-subsisting, eternal Being, this is only a concept apprehended by a human intellectual reality. It would not be the outward, visible reality, which is beyond the power of human mind to conceive or encompass. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 192) ?

See, for example, passages in which Bahá'u'lláh clearly differentiates between the knowledge of God and the knowledge of the Manifestation of God: 'He Who is the Day-Spring of Thy signs and the Revealer of Thy clear tokens hath, notwithstanding the immensity of His wisdom and the loftiness of His knowledge, confessed His powerlessness to comprehend the least of Thine utterances, in their relation to Thy most exalted Pen, – how much more is He incapable of apprehending the nature of Thine all-glorious Self and of Thy most August Essence!' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 273) ?

'Let no one meditating, in the light of the afore-quoted passages, on the nature of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, mistake its character or misconstrue the intent of its Author. The divinity attributed to so great a Being and the complete incarnation of the names and attributes of God in so exalted a Person should, under no circumstances, be misconceived or misinterpreted. The human temple that has been made the vehicle of so overpowering a Revelation must, if we be faithful to the tenets of our Faith, ever remain entirely distinguished from that "innermost Spirit of Spirits" and "eternal Essence of Essences" – that invisible yet rational God Who, however much we extol the divinity of His Manifestations on earth, can in no wise incarnate His infinite, His unknowable, His incorruptible and all-embracing Reality in the concrete and limited frame of a mortal being. Indeed, the God Who could so incarnate His own reality would, in the light of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, cease immediately to be God. So crude and fantastic a theory of Divine incarnation is as removed from, and incompatible with, the essentials of Bahá'í belief as are the no less inadmissible pantheistic and anthropomorphic conceptions of God – both of which the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh emphatically repudiate and the fallacy of which they expose.' (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, pp. 112–13) ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, ch. 82, pp. 290–6. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 1, p. 4. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 193, pp. 177–8. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 222. ?

There is also 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement: 'no one hath any access to the Invisible Essence. The way is barred and the road is impassable. In this world all men must turn their faces toward "Him-whom God-shall-Manifest". He is the "Dawning-place of Divinity" and the "Manifestation of Deity". He is the "Ultimate Goal", the "Adored One" of all and the "Worshipped One" of all. Otherwise, whatever flashes through the mind is not that Essence of essences and the Reality of realities; nay, rather it is pure imagination woven by man and is surrounded, not the surrounding. Consequently, it returns finally to the realm of suppositions and conjectures.' (*Tablets of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 485) ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 149. ?

Provisional translation by the present author. The original text for these translated passages can found in *Alváh-i Mubarakih Hadrat Bahá'u'lláh: Iqtidárát wa chand lawh digár*, pp. 108–9. ?

'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that what the philosophers call the Primal Intellect (or First Mind, `aql-i awwal) is the same as the Bahá'í term Primal Will (*mashiyyat-i awwal*); *Some Answered Questions*, ch. 53, p. 203 (original text p. 155). ?

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See Lambden, 'The Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Moses/Sinai Motifs in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture' in *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi* (*Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'u'lláh Religions*, vol. 5, ed. Moojan Momen), pp. 155–8. See also Shoghi Effendi's categorical assertion of this position, citing Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 126 and 127. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátíb-i `Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 2, p. 141; provisional translation by the present author. The same point is made in *Makátíb*, vol. 3, p. 356. I am grateful to Keven Brown for pointing out to me this important quotation. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqtidárát*, pp. 219–20.

Provisional translation by Khazeh Fananapazir in 'A Tablet of Mírzá Husayn `Alí Bahá'u'lláh to Jamál-i Burújjirdí: a full provisional translation,' *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, vol. 5, no. 1–2, Jan. 1991, pp.

4–12, see p. 6. ?

From a Tablet to Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání concerning the Questions of Manakji Limji Hataria; Ishráq Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 7, p. 143; a provisional translation by Juan Cole published on the Internet. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 106, p. 213. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Iqtidárát*, pp. 110–11. A provisional translation to be found in Momen, 'Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Uncompounded Reality, (Lawh Basít Al-haqíqa)', published on the Internet at <http://www.northill.demon.co.uk/relstud/basit.htm> ?

Ishráq Khávarí, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 7, p. 145. From a Tablet to Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl Gulpáygání concerning the Questions of Manakji Limji Hataria; a provisional translation by Juan Cole. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic no. 4. ?

Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, chap. 82, pp. 290–6. ?

*Dalá'il-i Sab'ih*, translated in the *Báb*, *Selections*, p. 125–6. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 25, p. 60. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 196, p. 178. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, para. 161, pp. 152–3. ?

See Momen, 'Relativism: A Basis of Bahá'í Metaphysics' in *Studies in Honor of the Late Hasan M. Balyuzi*, p. 192. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, paras. 191–2, pp. 176–7. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Persian no. 29. ?

00. A provisional translation from `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátíb `Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 95–6. I am grateful to J. Vahid Brown for drawing my attention to this important passage. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá lists seven stages of the ascent of the human soul, the last of which, the perfect soul (an-nafs al-kámilah) enters successively the realms of Malakút and Jabarút. *Makátíb `Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 1, pp. 93–5. ?

Thus, for example, in a meditation revealed during the fast, Bahá'u'lláh writes of the Jabarút of Decree and the Malakút of the Execution (of the Decree, jabarut al-qadá' wa malakút al-imdá'), *Nafahát-i Fadl*, vol. 5, p. 17. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 153, pp. 326–7. ?

Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, no. 1, pp. 4–5. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátíb*, vol. 1, pp. 47–8.

Provisional translation in Momen, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: “I was a Hidden Treasure”’, p. 32. ?

Bahá’u’lláh, Prayers and Meditations, no. 176, pp. 271–2. ?

Bahá’u’lláh, Kitáb-i-Íqán, para. 216, p. 196. ?

‘Wert thou to ponder in thine heart, from now until the end that hath no end, and with all the concentrated intelligence and understanding which the greatest minds have attained in the past or will attain in the future, this divinely ordained and subtle Reality [the human soul], this sign of the revelation of the All-Abiding, All-Glorious God, thou wilt fail to comprehend its mystery or to appraise its virtue. Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days.’ (Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, no. 83, p. 165) ?

Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, no. 93, p. 192. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also cites this Tradition in Makátíb, vol. 1, p. 32. ?

Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets, p. 140. ?

See also Makátíb `Abdu'l-Bahá, vol. 3, pp. 354–8. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 295. ?

These approximately correspond to the Quranic concept that there is a two-stage process in the functioning of al-amr (the Command of God). First God orders, prepares or arranges the amr (yudabbir al-amr, Qur’án 10:3, 10:31, 13:2, 33:5). then he sends it down (some form of the root n-z-l: yunazzila, anzalná, etc. Qur’án 16:2, 44: 3, 65:12). This corresponds with the realms of láhút, where the revelation is prepared, and jabarút, which carries out the action of delivering the revelation. For a more detailed look at this question see Momen, ‘A Study of the Meaning of the Word “Al-Amr” in the Qur’án and in the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh’.

?

This subdivision is extensively discussed in Ra’fati, ‘Marátib-i Sab`ih va Hadíth-i Mashhiyyat’. ?

`Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation, pp. 255–6, 268–9. ?

Bahá’u’lláh, Tablets, p. 129. ?

Bahá’u’lláh, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, pp. 13–14. ?

Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings, no. 134, p. 290. ?

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