

Antinomies of Reason and the Theology of Revelation: Some Preliminary Thoughts

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Abstract

Central to Bahá'í philosophy and theology is the doctrine of revelation. A thesis of Progressive Revelation offers a unique solution to the fundamental antinomies of philosophical discourse in general. Accordingly, Bahá'í theology of revelation should not be understood as an isolated or residual theological, philosophical, or sociological principle. The article tries to demonstrate the general and foundational significance of the concept revelation by applying it to the central question of modern philosophy, i.e., Kantian antinomies of reason.

Résumé

La doctrine de la révélation joue un rôle central dans la philosophie et la théologie bahá'íe. En effet, la thèse de la révélation progressive offre une solution unique aux antinomies fondamentales du discours philosophique général. Par conséquent, la théologie bahá'íe de la révélation ne devrait être comprise comme un principe théologique, philosophique ou sociologique isolé ou résiduel. Le présent article tente de démontrer l'importance sur le général et fondamental du concept de révélation en l'appliquant à la question centrale posée par la philosophie moderne, l'antinomie kantienne de la raison.

Resumen

La doctrina de revelación sirve de punto de partida a la filosofía y teología bahá'í. La tesis de la Revelación Progresiva ofrece una solución original a las antinomias fundamentales del discurso filosófico en general. Por lo tanto, la teología bahá'í en cuanto a revelación no debe ser entendida como un principio teológico, filosófico o sociológico sobrando a aislado. El artículo procura demostrar el significado general y fundamental del concepto de revelación mediante su aplicación al tema central de la filosofía moderna y las antinomias Kantianas de la razón.

The aim of theological discourse is understanding the supreme Being. According to the Bahá'í perspective, the ultimate meaning and purpose of human life is recognition, love, and worship of God. Bahá'u'lláh explicated this point when he wrote: "The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence" (*Gleanings* 70). However, Bahá'ís rarely use the term *theology* when describing the principles, philosophy, and teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. It may at first seem that there is a contradiction or inconsistency between the Bahá'í idea that knowledge of God is the purpose of human existence and its reluctance to call its beliefs theological. But there is no inconsistency here. The apparent inconsistency is the key to understanding the uniqueness of Bahá'í theology.

A glimpse at major Bahá'í theological writings like Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán* and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Some Answered Questions* will make it evident that two premises are essential to Bahá'í philosophical theology. The first premise is that the goal and meaning of human existence is the recognition and knowledge of God. The second premise indicates that God is absolutely transcendental and beyond the limits and possibility of human knowledge and experience. Either of these two premises taken separately will lead to opposite implications with regard to the relation of Bahá'í Faith and theology. The first premise will define all Bahá'í discourse as primarily theological, whereas the second will refute the possibility of theology. What distinguishes Bahá'í philosophy is its unique synthesis of these two premises, leading to a particular stance on the nature of theology.

Because of the centrality of these two premises, I should address a possible objection even to positing an apparent antinomy between them. It may be argued that while humans cannot completely understand the divine reality, they can have limited knowledge of the nature and attributes of God, according to their rational capacity. If that is the case, then there is no antinomy. While this is a common view in the philosophical theology of the adherents of previous religions, it is categorically rejected by the Bahá'í writings. According to Bahá'í writings, we can know nothing about the nature of God. In fact, our "limited" conception of God's attributes is (if they are conceived as objective attributes of God) worse than the worship of idols, because idols at least have objective existence, while human understanding of God is purely speculation. It is true that the Bahá'í writings mention the

attributes of God and the possibility of their knowledge by human beings, but these attributes are really the attributes of the prophets and not of God. All humanly known attributes and praises of God refer simply to the prophets and nothing else. Of course, as we will see, the antinomy can be resolved, but only through the category of revelation. However, that requires a fundamental reinterpretation of the concepts of truth, knowledge, and being. To clarify this point, two statements by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá will be quoted. In his Tablet to Salmán, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

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. 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, Whoever pondereth this truth in his heart will readily admit that there are certain limits which no human being can possibly transgress.... No tie of direct intercourse can ever bind Him to the things He hath created, nor can the most abstruse and most remote allusions of His creatures do justice to His being.... He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His own exalted and indivisible Essence, and will everlastingly continue to remain concealed in His inaccessible majesty and glory.... How can, therefore, the creature which the Word of God hath fashioned comprehend the nature of Him Who is the Ancient of Days? (*Gleanings* 317–18)

Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

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 become infinite. This is an evident error.

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.... reflect that different peoples of the world are revolving around imaginations and are worshipers of the idols of thoughts and conjectures.... They regard themselves as the people of Unity, and the others as worshipers of idols; but idols at least have a mineral existence, while the idols of thoughts and the imaginations of man are but fancies; they have not even mineral existence. (*Some Answered Questions* 148–49)

The solution of this fundamental ontological and anthropological antinomy is the ultimate concern of Bahá'í philosophy and theology. Philosophy is a foundational discourse on being and knowledge. For this reason, the antinomy between the transcendental definition of God and the spiritual definition of human nature as a being oriented to God is indeed the fundamental antinomy of philosophical thought in general. This antinomy is ontological because it deals with the ultimate nature of being and the essential being of beings. It is also anthropological because it investigates the limit of human knowledge, the meaning of human existence, and the possibility of human emancipation, self-actualization, and spiritual journey. This is not simply a question of the relation between faith and reason, nor is it merely a question of monism and pluralism. On the contrary, this antinomy explicates both questions of ontology and epistemology, and their interrelationships. This implies that the Bahá'í thesis of Progressive Revelation, which offers its theology of revelation as the solution to its theological antinomy, cannot be adequately understood in terms of Christian or Islamic readings of Bahá'í texts and categories. Bahá'í writings usually employ the current language and categories of their time but always reinterpret and transform their meanings. In Bahá'í philosophy, the principle of revelation or manifestationhood (*mazhariyyat*) is not an isolated element of its worldview. In fact, this principle underlies the Bahá'í Faith's position with regard to all major philosophical, sociological, and spiritual questions. Bahá'ís themselves have not adequately noted the centrality of this principle and the consequent revolution in theology brought about by Bahá'u'lláh, partly because they are accustomed to the pre-Bahá'í theological hermeneutics, which find the question of revelation an isolated and residual philosophical issue.

Therefore, this antinomy is not a scholastic exercise peculiar to the Bahá'í Faith. On the contrary, the antinomy of the two Bahá'í theological premises articulates the most basic antinomy of philosophical discourse in

general. Consequently, the resolution of that antinomy offers a unique and fundamental solution to many major philosophical questions of the age, including those of monism vs. pluralism, agreement of reason and faith, the nature and meaning of truth and investigation of truth, the meaning of philosophy and the nature of spiritual journey, the relation between history and revelation, epistemology of resemblance vs. historical reason, this worldliness vs. otherworldliness, levels of unity in diversity, transcendental vs. anthropomorphic definitions of God, religion and alienation, and many other important topics.

While space limitations do not allow a discussion of the relevance of this theological antinomy to all those issues, the article will discuss the general import of Bahá'í theological premises by investigating the fundamental philosophical theories of three of the most creative modern philosophers. I will explicate the basic problem of philosophy by discussing its most influential expression in philosophical literature, i.e., the Kantian dilemma. Three alternative resolutions to the Kantian dilemma advocated in the writings of Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche will then be briefly described. In discussing these three philosophers, I will not emphasize the details of their philosophy but only their underlying common problematics. Next, I will discuss the Bahá'í solution to the same question by analyzing the Bahá'í synthesis of its two theological premises. Finally, a brief note on the novel nature of Bahá'í theology will conclude the article.

The Kantian Dilemma

The essence of Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) philosophy is his distinction between the thing in itself and its appearance. He argued against the optimistic theory of knowledge prevalent in many rationalist and empiricist traditions, according to which the essence of reality or the nature of things can be understood by human cognition. Dogmatic rationalists believed that through the use of reason we can surpass the empirical attributes of things and discover their hidden nature. Dogmatic empiricists defined reality as a set of empirical attributes that can be known through experience. The rationalist and the empiricist had opposite conceptions of the nature of being and the appropriate way of attaining knowledge, but both emphasized the capacity of the human mind to know the essence and nature of being.

For Kant, however, human knowledge does not reflect the real essence of being. Knowledge, according to Kant, is always constructed and determined by the limits and character of the human mind. Unlike the empiricists who thought of the human mind as a blank tablet that passively reflects the objective world (Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*), Kant believed that the human mind is an active structure which gives form and determination to the raw material of sensory data entering the mind. In other words, according to Kant the world perceived and conceived by humans is in fact created by the human mind. The laws of logic, for instance, are not a reflection of the essential relations of beings. On the contrary, Kant maintained, they are the human mind's arbitrary forms imposed on sensory data, leading to an entirely humanly constructed world of appearance. Therefore, Kant asserted, we humans must think of reality in a particular way and have no other choice. The world as we can conceptualize it is nothing but an appearance. We can only know of reality what appears to us, and this appearance is created, formed, shaped, and determined by the type, structure, and character of the mind we possess (*Critique of Pure Reason* 1–186).

For this reason, Kantian theory is called “critical theory.” His three major works are different forms of critique (*Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, and *Critique of Judgment*). Critique is an attempt at self-consciousness. In other words, it first studies the limits of the mind itself. In his critical inquiry concerning the human mind and knowledge, Kant argued that space and time are forms of intuition imposed by the human mind onto the materials of perception (*Critique of Pure Reason* 21–43). Similarly, he stated that the twelve categories of understanding (logic)—like cause and effect, unity and plurality, necessity and contingency—are also mental forms applied to objects of perception (*Critique of Pure Reason* 60–67). The outcome of Kantian theory is a fundamental distinction between the reality as it is in itself, and the world as it appears to us. The realm of things in themselves are beyond the possibility of human knowledge and experience. However, the world that we know is merely a projection of the human mind itself.

Kantian theory creates a major dilemma. On the one hand, humans long to experience and discover the true being. On the other hand such knowledge is outside of the limits of reason. But human beings try to understand the invisible, unfathomable, unnamable world. Therefore, they apply the categories of the mind to the realm of things in themselves. However, unlike the realm of appearance, there are no materials of sense perception corresponding to things in themselves. The realm of appearance is constructed by application of mental forms to experiential matter, but there are no experiential data for the real being. Consequently, we apply the laws of logic to issues that transcend human categories. In other words, when the human mind tries to understand theology, it applies the categories of limitation to the unlimited realm. The result is what Kant calls the antinomies of reason (*Critique of Pure Reason* 230–318).

In discussing the realm of things in themselves, Kant looks at the three questions of the existence of God—the eternity of the soul and the boundaries of time and space. He argues that in thinking about these questions the human mind arrives at logically rational but opposite propositions. For instance; reason can equally prove or disprove various arguments for the existence of God. Similarly, the mind can equally prove and disprove that the world and time have a beginning and an end. In other words, reason finds itself trapped with antinomies that it can neither solve nor avoid (*Critique of Pure Reason* 238–318). In the realm of appearance, however, rejection of one of the contraries is adequate proof and affirmation of the validity of the other proposition. The realm of appearance fits the laws of logic and is not characterized by equally rational but opposite propositions. Kantian theory, therefore, struggles with one fundamental question: the question of the antinomies of reason. We humans long and strive for recognition of the true being, yet we find reason unable to know it.

Three Solutions to the Antinomies of Reason

Kantian theory is celebrated as one of the most creative philosophical achievements of all ages. Kant's concept of the antinomies of reason, based upon his distinction between things in themselves and appearances, is by itself a major philosophical insight. Even if Kant's theory had ended at this point, he would have merited praise as a great thinker. However, Kant tries to go beyond the antinomies of reason to solve his philosophical dilemma. That he attempts to find a solution to the antinomies testifies to human inner attraction and desire to understand the truth of being, the realm of the unconditional and the infinite.

However, the Kantian solution to this dilemma is only one of many solutions offered to the same problem. It will be useful to compare, selectively, the solutions suggested by Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche. For Kant, it is through moral action and aesthetics that the antinomies are finally resolved. According to his theory, while it is impossible to discover the hidden nature of reality through the use of theoretical reason, it is possible to unite the thing in itself and its appearance by (a) acting on the basis of moral laws and (b) engaging in artistic activity and aesthetic experience. Kant's arguments for his claims are complex and significant. Action on the basis of moral law, he argued, represents an affirmation of the true nature of humans in the realm of apparent nature. By acting morally, humans act as both a thing in itself and a phenomenal or empirical being. In other words, humans can transcend the limits of their empirical existence by listening to the voice of moral conscience. Action on the basis of moral duty represents a self-legislated activity that is not determined by the causality of nature (utilitarian considerations). Therefore, the realm of morality is the realm of human freedom. From morality and human freedom, Kant deduces both the existence of God and the eternity of the human soul (*Critique of Practical Reason* 43–52). Similarly, art and aesthetics represent the unity of universal and particular, formal and material, freedom and necessity, things in themselves and appearances. The unity of the two realms is realized through the mediation of play and art representing a disinterested (noumenal) interest (phenomenal) (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*).

Kantian theory was further developed and modified by many philosophers during the next two centuries. An important development can be found in Schopenhauer's (1788–1860) worldview. Schopenhauer affirmed Kant's distinction between the realm of invisible things in themselves and the realm of visible appearances. However, Schopenhauer argued that the real world, namely, the domain of things in themselves, is nothing but the unity of the eternal will. The realm of appearance, conversely, is the realm of representations. The former defies any rational investigation, while the latter is the empirical world that we can experience, comprehend, and conceptualize. Contrary to the unity of the primeval will, the realm of representation is, by definition, the realm of temporal and spatial differentiation of plurality and individuation. This means that individual will and desires belong to the realm of representations and not to the realm of eternal will (*The World as Will and Idea* 1–216).

Schopenhauer's reconstruction of the Kantian dilemma did not challenge the relevance of the fundamental antinomy of critical theory. For Schopenhauer, authentic existence requires a return to the original unity of the supreme will. At the same time, he finds the categories of human knowledge to be necessary expressions of the individuating realm of representations. He longs for the peace and unity of the original will, yet finds reason a means of confinement to the realm of representations. Schopenhauer presents a number of successive solutions to his existential dilemma, but his supreme resolution is his call for renunciation of the material, empirical world and its corresponding individual desires and will. It is through desiring nothing that one can be saved from the sufferings of the world of individuality and representations. Asceticism, mysticism, and annihilation of the individuated self in the cosmic and eternal unity are Schopenhauer's solutions to his quest for the infinite (*The World as Will and Idea* 349–532).

Nietzsche's (1844–1900) theory was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer, but, for Nietzsche, both Kant's and Schopenhauer's entire projects were mistaken. What was most unacceptable to Nietzsche was Schopenhauer's rejection of the empirical, historical, and natural world. On his own terms, Nietzsche wanted to affirm life. For this reason he (a) rejects Kantian distinction between the thing in itself and its appearance and (b) affirms this worldly

orientation against the ideas of both Kant and Schopenhauer. It is important to note that for Nietzsche, the realm of the thing in itself was the same as the realm of morality and religion. That is why he rejected both institutions (*Twilight of the Idols* 45–56).

While Nietzsche resolved the Kantian dilemma by denying any validity to the realm of invisible suprarational, supranatural, and supramaterial truth, his philosophical standpoint differentiates between ordinary human beings with their distorted and inferior nature, and extraordinary humans who are the ultimate expression of authentic nature and the aim of social and cultural existence (Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*). His “Superman” is one who transcends ordinary human beings and becomes a perfect reflection of authentic existence among ordinary human beings (Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*). In a sense, Nietzsche has reaffirmed the Kantian dilemma in a different form. His solution to the dilemma is the advent of “Superman.” Paradoxically, while Nietzsche’s theory is the furthest from Bahá’í theology, his solution, if reinterpreted, offers a significant step towards the Bahá’í perspective.

Bahá’í Solution: Theology of Revelation

According to Bahá’í theology, created being is a manifestation of the primal will of God. Consequently, the objective being of all beings is nothing but a reflection of that eternal will. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes a distinction between the subjective (or general), and the objective (or veritable) types of existence. Subjective or imaginary existence is a mental construct and is equally and unequivocally predicated to all beings. However, this subjective being is not the real or objective being of things. The objective being of every entity is unique to itself and is different from the being of other things. In other words, the category of “objective being” is an equivocal term. This is nothing but the doctrine of the grades and hierarchy of being. At the same time, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes, all these objective beings of different existing things are various reflections of the absolute being of God through the revelation of God’s primeval being (*Some Answered Questions* 292–93). That is why, Bahá’ís argue, the divine creative act is a continuous process. It is not the case that God once created the world and thereafter the world continued to exist independently. At each moment, the creative act is renewed because existence is always nothing but divine revelation. Then the essence, truth, and inner meaning of all beings is a longing for knowledge of God. For human beings, who make their being a question for themselves, this understanding becomes particularly imperative. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defines the human being as the moment of dawn, located between the night and the day (*Matla’-al-fajr*), indicating the contradictory nature of human beings (*Makátib* 2:41). He makes the same point when he describes the human station as “in the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality” or “the end of the night and the beginning of day” (*Some Answered Questions* 235). Humans are located at the intersection of the end of the arc of descent and the beginning of the arc of ascent. Therefore, active search and journey towards attainment of divine presence and knowledge become the supreme ontological meaning of human existence (*Some Answered Questions* 235).

However, the world is not identical with God, nor is its condition of being the same as divine reality. While the world exists in its own station, it is nonexistent relative to the divine realm (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 278). God is defined as absolutely transcendental, invisible, and unknowable in Bahá’í philosophy. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that understanding the reality of God is impossible for humans because knowledge is dependent on two preconditions. The first condition is resemblance between the subject and the object. If the station, qualities, and properties of the object are not present in the subject) it will be impossible [or the subject to conceptualize the object. In other words, human knowledge is always conditioned by human characteristics and the limits of human reason. Our knowledge is always a reflection or projection of our particular type of being and existence. The second condition is the surrounding of the object by the subject. The subject, in other words, should belong to a higher station than the object. It is obvious that there is no resemblance between God and the world, nor does the human being surround the divine reality. Hence, humans are unable to understand the invisible kingdom of God (*Makátib* 2:45–47).

Thus, we return to the same fundamental philosophical question that was expressed in a different form in critical theory. We noted that this antinomy led to a rejection of the divine in Nietzsche, a rejection of the world and history in Schopenhauer, and an affirmation of morality and aesthetics in Kant. For Bahá’ís, the first two strategies are utterly unacceptable. Defining reality in only material and natural terms is wrong because it ignores the inner meaning of human existence and overlooks the symbolic character of the realm of creation.

Bahá’u’lláh writes:

Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein....

Say: Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 141–42)

Schopenhauer is equally at variance with the Bahá'í writings. Humans can never attain unity with divine essence, nor are the renunciation of the natural world and flight from history and society positive means of human liberation and fulfillment. Bahá'u'lláh affirms:

The pious deeds of the monks and priests among the followers of the Spirit [Jesus]—upon Him be the peace of God—are remembered in His presence. In this Day, however, let them give up the life of seclusion and direct their steps towards the open world and busy themselves with that which will profit themselves and others. (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 24)

Morality and aesthetics are valid, but they are only partial ways of resolving the dilemma of human existence. For Bahá'ís, the ultimate solution is the recognition of the Manifestation of God for that age.

The preconditions of knowledge in Bahá'í philosophy imply that human knowledge is always a reflection of the station and perfection of being at the level of human existence. Humans cannot understand divine reality at the level of transcendental mystery, but they can discover the reflection of divine attributes at the level of the created realm. Hence, human knowledge of God turns into human knowledge of the revelations of God in the realm of nature and history, but everything is a reflection and manifestation of God. Consequently, all beings proclaim divine reality and testify to the presence of God, but the supreme mirrors of divine attributes are human beings who are endowed with both material existence and spiritual self-consciousness. At the same time, the clearest reflection of divine attributes are those rare perfect humans who are the ultimate expression of human perfection and the highest revelation of God at the level of empirical and historical world. In the language of the Bahá'í Faith, these representatives of God are called Manifestations of God. Hence, Manifestations of God are the utmost reflections of divine mystery through the historical dynamics of Progressive Revelation. Divine unity can only be recognized through the diversity of the Manifestations' Progressive Revelation. While all other forms of human perfection, like morality and aesthetics, are also partial manifestations of God, the supreme purpose of human existence is fulfilled through the recognition of the Day-Stars of the divine will. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation.... Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self....

These energies... lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of light are potentially present in the lamp....

And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven.... They are commissioned to use the inspiration of Their words, the effusions of Their infallible grace and the sanctifying breeze of Their Revelation for the cleansing of every longing heart and receptive spirit from the dross and dust of earthly cares and limitations. Then, and only then, will the Trust of God, latent in the reality of man, emerge, as resplendent as the rising Orb of Divine Revelation, from behind the veil of concealment, and implant the ensign of its revealed glory upon summits of men's hearts. (*Gleanings* 65–67)

One of the most important principles of Bahá'í theology is the concept of Progressive Revelation, which means that knowledge of God, as reflected in the recognition of the Manifestation of God, is a dynamic and historical project. Human knowledge is always directed at human potentialities capable of actualization. However, as historical and cultural beings, humans evolve and advance through their social, cultural, and spiritual evolution. Consequently each stage of sociohistorical development, a higher form of knowledge may become possible. This means that divine revelation through God's Manifestations must be repeated and renewed in each age. In other words, God is recognized through the historical dynamics of Progressive Revelations, their diverse and ever-advancing spiritual civilization. Nietzsche's "Superman" similar to Hegel's "Great Historical Men" and the

Romantic “Genius,” considered as different shadows of the Bahá’í concept of the Manifestation of God. In all these different theories, a heroic individual becomes the solution for all epistemological and philosophical mysteries of nature and society. A genius is portrayed as the unity of the individual and the spirit of the age, particular and the universal, the transcendental and the phenomenal, and the appearance of a thing and its invisible structure. While excellence in any cultural achievement is a partial reflection of divine glory in human history, it is in the figure of the Manifestation of God that the supreme revelation of eternal truth assumes a phenomenal and historical form. What is distinctive about the realm of Manifestation, as the mediating link between the divine realm and the realm of creation, is the dual station of the Manifestations of God. They are both invisible and visible, one and many, and eternal and temporal.

The Unique Nature of Bahá’í Theology

Bahá’í discourse is theological because for Bahá’ís being is nothing but a reflection of divine revelation. However, Bahá’í theology is not a separate discipline unrelated to other forms of knowledge. On the contrary, since knowledge of the essence of God is impossible, theology is reoriented towards the recognition of the effects of divine will in the realm of creation. The highest theological ideal is the recognition of the Manifestation of God in that particular age. However, Manifestations of God express the divine will in accordance with the concrete potentialities of the age. In other words, the mission of each Manifestation of God is to actualize moral, spiritual, cultural, and social potentialities of human civilization. Ultimately, Bahá’í theology is directly linked to a social and historical discourse, the aim of which is to further social, cultural, and spiritual advancement of humanity. Any theology not oriented to the improvement and elevation of human life is categorically rejected by Bahá’u’lláh. Similarly, any project of human liberation and progress presupposes an affirmation of the spiritual nature of human beings and the dialectics of divine revelation. In this age, the supreme aim of theological discourse is the attainment of the oneness of humanity, the ultimate goal of the Bahá’í Revelation. In his Tablet of Wisdom, Bahá’u’lláh describes the desirable type of philosophy and philosopher (those of knowledge or *hukama*):

Verily We love those men of knowledge who have brought to light such things as promote the best interests of humanity, and We aided them through the potency of Our behest, for well are We able to achieve Our purpose.

Beware, O My loved ones, lest ye despise the merits of My learned servants whom God hath graciously chosen to be the exponents of His Name “the Fashioner” amidst mankind. Exert your utmost endeavour that ye may develop such crafts and undertakings that everyone, whether young or old, may benefit therefrom. (*Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh* 150–51)

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