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Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.bahai.org) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit journal.bahaistudies.ca/online/about/submissions/.

## About the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is "divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men." The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is "to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, 'abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith'" (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the "Glory of God"—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured torture and forty years of imprisonment and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

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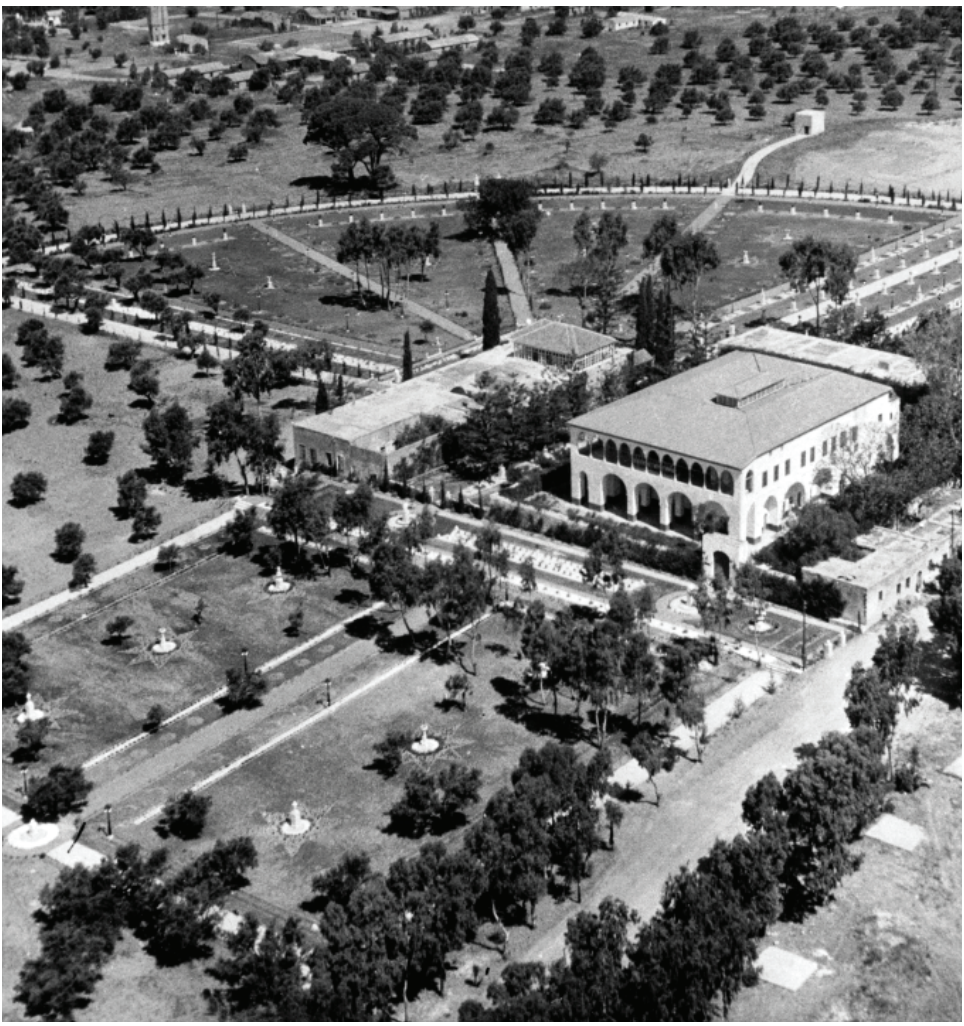

Aerial view of Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh, Mansion of Bahjí
and surrounding gardens, 1954

# From the Editor's Desk

MICHAEL SABET

## The Mind, the Heart, and the Infinite

The two articles in this edition of the *Journal* complement each other in their treatment of two themes: the nature of the Manifestation's engagement with the prior religious Dispensation, and the interplay between mind and heart in the human being's efforts to know and worship God.

On the first theme, each article sheds light on some of the uses Bahá'u'lláh chooses to make of the fruits of the Islamic Dispensation. In "Bahá'u'lláh's 'Long Healing Prayer' ('*Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí*') in light of a Metaphysics of Unity," Dr. Daniel Pschaida explores the ways in which Bahá'u'lláh deploys a central trope in Islam—the divine names—in ways that resonate with, and build upon, the tradition. In "Bahá'u'lláh and the God of Avicenna," Joshua Hall demonstrates how Bahá'u'lláh, speaking from His privileged insight into metaphysical reality, affirms to a remarkable degree the clear-sighted rational theology of the seminal Islamic philosopher Avicenna (Ibn Síná, 980-1037). Each article gives us a glimpse into the method of the Manifestation of God. Moving from a pre-existent condition into a human form, at the historical moment in which the forces and potential of the previous Dispensation have been fully expressed, the Manifestation selects from amongst the many threads that human minds and hearts have spun out of the Stuff of the prior Revelation. He chooses the most excellent amongst them, and weaves them, together with those new threads sprung from His mind, into a novel, mould-breaking design. The result is a fresh tapestry, an original composition of the Mind of the Manifestation that nonetheless resonates with what has come before. In studying the placement of those older threads in the new tapestry, both articles provide insight into the phenomenon of Progressive Revelation.

The other major link between the two articles is that each, in its own way, illuminates the inextricable interplay of the heart and mind, those two facets of ourselves which we so often hold in tension with each other, but which both exist to strive towards the divine.

Pschaida elaborates on how the device of the divine names has been, and continues to be, a path to knowing the Unknowable. The author flows freely between approaches to his topic, moving from a sober analysis of syllabic counts and historical contexts to a meditative reflection on the relationships between the Names of God. Trust is on display here—trust that when the mind is illumined by the heart, it can uncover some of the innumerable levels of meaning layered within the rhymes and repetitions of the Long Healing Prayer.

> With renunciation, not with grammar's rules, one must be armed:
> Be nothing, then, and cross this sea unharmed. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, quoting a verse by Rumi)

The reader, likewise, is invited to rely on intuitive insight, the vision that seems to arise when we cease to live in heart or mind alone, but experience them as one, and ourselves as whole.

Hall's exploration subtly follows a similar course, even as it lucidly lays out the intricacies of Avicenna's philosophy. As he iterates the logical consequences of the Necessity of God's existence, Hall shows how the philosopher Avicenna, the rational mind *par excellence*, falls into rhapsody; at some point, the mathematics become music. As we follow the philosopher's reasoning, the profundity of the implications of the descriptions given to God by Bahá'u'lláh is gradually revealed. The reader's mind is led to a fuller appreciation of the significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's confirmation that Bahá'í theology is apophatic, or negative: the names ascribed to God can only ever tell us what He is not, without hinting at what He is (*Some Answered Questions* 37). A Singleness that is beyond singleness; an Existence, compared to which nothing else exists. To call our being even a shadow of that Being overstates us. The mind's logic points down the path that must end with its own acknowledgment of its incapacity to glimpse this Beyond.

> 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. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 83:4)

Somewhere in the reading—perhaps right at the point where the mind begins to reel as the implications of God's unknowability crystallize—a feeling of awe dawns in the heart. The heart, which can be awed at even a sunset, or a human act of selflessness, awakens to the true possibilities of awe:

> Ye shall be hindered from loving Me and souls shall be perturbed as they make mention of Me. For minds cannot grasp Me nor hearts contain Me. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Arabic Hidden Words* 66)

As always, the articles in this issue are complemented by art—that human reaching toward what the mind cannot grasp, nor the heart contain. The cover features a photograph by Shahriar Erfanian, highlighting the minimalist elegance of some corners of the Holy Places. Inside the issue, photographs of a venerable tree at Bahjí accompany Selvi Adaikkalam Zabihi's poem, "Sycamore Fig," which gives voice to the unspoken thoughts of generations of pilgrims who have touched the tree's bark, looked up at its foliage, and thought about "Who may have passed / or paused in its shade."

# You might also like to read...

As a service to our readers, we are including references to articles (and, sometimes, books) related to the subjects presented in this issue. These are articles that have been previously published in the *Journal* and are available for free on our website.

A Scientific Proof of the Existence of God
by *William S. Hatcher*
doi.org/10.31581/jbs-5.4.1(1993)

In 1921 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá presented a cogent scientific argument for the existence of an objective, unseen force as the only reasonable explanation for the phenomenon of biological evolution. In the years since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s proof was first published, the findings of science have tended to show that, indeed, the phenomenon of evolution represents a persistent movement from disorder towards order of the kind that strongly suggests the action of some unobservable force different from all other forces so far discovered. In this article, we present a somewhat detailed reformulation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument using certain contemporary scientific terms that were not current at the time ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote.

By the same author, see also the book *Minimalism*, published by Juxta and available as a free download at william.hatcher.org

A Discourse on Bahá’í Theology: A Treatise by Dr. ‘Alí-Murád Dávúdí on God and Revelation
translated by *Vargha Bolodo-Taefi*
doi.org/10.31581/jbs-30.4.298(2020)

Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb
by *Nader Saiedi*
bahaistudies.ca/books/gate-of-the-heart

Nader Saiedi’s meticulous and insightful analysis identifies the key themes, terms, and concepts that characterize each stage of the Báb’s writings, unlocking the code of the Báb’s mystical lexicon. Gate of the Heart is a subtle and profound textual study and an essential resource for anyone wishing to understand the theological foundations of the Bahá’í religion and the Báb’s significance in religious history.

Some Reflections of the Different Meanings of the Word Báb
by *Amelia Danesh*
doi.org/10.31581/jbs-2.3.424(1990)

This essay examines the word *báb* in relation to Islamic architecture, Twelver Shiism. the claims of Sayyid ‘Ali-Muhammad, and the status of Mullá Husayn-i-Bushrú’í. It concludes by suggesting that the word *báb* provides an example of how the Bábi and Bahá’í religions have endowed well-known words and phrases with new meanings.

# From the Study in the Shrine

BRUCE FILSON

Pegasus, the stained glass insert,
flanks the architect's study window,
door-side.

Beside the marble foyer
I pitter-patter my heart about.

Two owls, like sentinels, four beavers,
pine cones and leaves adorn the mantle
in a lavish frieze.

I do not hear the dancing in the studio
nor the Master's voice rising against materialism.
That was all years ago.

I do not muse around the drawing room
nor go directly to the Master's room to pray.
Here, in the study, contentedly I stay.

Heaven's gate, the nightingale of paradise
and divine rose petals strewn like crumbs
to the birds of our hearts.

My spirit wanders in the Maxwell home
soothed, unfettered, removed.

I would resign my soul
to any well-appointed place
of the sanctuary

and sing and never cease
singing the praises of God.

The birds on the mountain never cease
and they have no soul but wind.

# Bahá'u'lláh and the God of Avicenna

JOSHUA D. T. HALL

*Abstract*

This article analyzes and compares the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh on the nature and existence of God with the core metaphysical positions of Avicenna, the preeminent philosopher of Islam. In three parts, it argues that Bahá'u'lláh validates the metaphysical principles underlying Avicenna's argument for the existence of God as the *vájib al-vujúd* or "the Necessarily Existent"; that His statements affirm Avicenna's deductive account of the divine attributes; and that He confirms the central content of Avicenna's arguments regarding the nature of God's creative act, His relation to the world, and the limitless duration, into the past and future, of His creation. It furthermore submits that Avicenna's philosophy sheds a uniquely informative light on Bahá'u'lláh's metaphysics and theology, insofar as his theological analysis helps one understand the philosophical content and significance, and rational rigor, of Bahá'u'lláh's own statements on God's existence, nature, and creative act.

*Résumé*

L'auteur analyse les enseignements de Bahá'u'lláh sur la nature et l'existence de Dieu et les compare avec les positions métaphysiques fondamentales d'Avicenne, philosophe prééminent de l'Islam. Dans cette analyse qui se décline en trois parties, l'auteur soutient que Bahá'u'lláh valide les principes métaphysiques sous-tendant l'exposition faite par Avicenne au sujet de l'existence de Dieu en tant que *vájib al-vujúd* ou "le Nécessairement Existant"; que ses déclarations confirment le récit déductif d'Avicenne sur les attributs divins; et qu'Il confirme le propos central des arguments d'Avicenne concernant la nature de l'acte créateur de Dieu, sa relation au monde, et la durée infinie de sa création, tant dans le passé que dans l'avenir. L'auteur soutient en outre que la philosophie d'Avicenne apporte un éclairage unique sur la métaphysique et la théologie de Bahá'u'lláh, dans la mesure où son analyse théologique aide à comprendre la teneur et la signification philosophiques, ainsi que la logique rigoureuse des déclarations de Bahá'u'lláh sur l'existence, la nature et l'acte créateur de Dieu.

*Resumen*

Este artículo analiza y compara las enseñanzas de Baha'u'lláh sobre la naturaleza y la existencia de Dios con las principales posiciones metafísicas de Avicena, el preeminente filósofo del Islam. En tres partes, argumenta que Baha'u'lláh valida los principios metafísicos subyacentes en el argumento de Avicena por la existencia de Dios como el *vájib al vujúd* o "Existente Necesario"; que Sus aseveraciones afirman los razonamientos deductivos de Avicena sobre los atributos divinos; y que El confirma el contenido central de los argumentos de Avicena relacionados a la naturaleza del actuar creativo de Dios, Su relación con el mundo, y la duración sin limites en el pasado y el futuro de Su creación. Además, sostiene que la filosofía de Avicena de manera única echa luz informativa sobre la metafísica y la teología de Baha'u'lláh, en la medida en que su analisis teológico le ayuda a uno entender el contenido y significado filosófico y el rigor racional, de

las aseveraciones propias de Baha'u'lláh sobre la existencia, la naturaleza, y el actuar creativo de Dios.

*Acknowledgements*

I would like first to thank Naeem Nabiliakbar for his continuing and ceaseless love, support, counsel, and encouragement, his unique insight into the Bahá'í Writings, and his invaluable assistance with and instruction in Persian and Arabic; Adib Masumian for his unflagging interest, generous help, enthusiasm, and patient proofreading; Professor Rhett Diessner for his sound, illuminating scholarly perspective and constructive comments; and Professor Ardi Kia, for his professional engagement, review, and kindness.

## Introduction

As suggested by the title, it is the aim of this article to analyze and compare the core theological positions of Bahá'u'lláh and the Islamic philosopher Avicenna. Avicenna, perhaps most famous in the West as the celebrated author of the *Qánún fí aṭ-Ṭibb* or *Canon of Medicine*, was a Persian Muslim born near the city of Bukhárá in 980 A.D. Propounding a rationalistic worldview and synthesis of Neoplatonism, Aristotelianism, and Islamic monotheism, Avicenna indelibly shaped the contents and character of Islamic philosophy from medieval into modern times and became, by far, the most influential philosopher of Islam; going well beyond the borders of the Islamic world, his ideas even informed the thought of the scholastic philosophers in Christian Europe, such as Thomas Aquinas (McGinnis 244).

Given the importance of Avicenna's thought in the history of Islam, within the cultural and religious context of which the Bahá'í Faith emerged, this article explores the currents of Avicenna's theology that are represented and affirmed in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, and, secondarily, in the explanations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Though Bahá'u'lláh Himself never composed a work of systematized theology (Schaefer xiii), His many writings in Arabic and Persian are nonetheless rich in metaphysical content. As a whole, they present a consistent philosophical worldview expressed in the substantial nomenclature of the Islamic intellectual tradition. Accordingly, one may approach an understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's theology by considering how it treats the central questions on the nature of God dealt with by Islamic philosophers, among whom Avicenna stands out as especially prominent. Throughout the course of this article, I will thus present two broad arguments. First, I propose that Bahá'u'lláh's theological teachings are substantively *affirmative* of the metaphysical principles underlying Avicenna's argument for God's existence and his philosophical positions on God's nature, attributes, and creative act, with no implication that His teachings are *derivative* from those of Avicenna or in any way *reducible* to them. Second, I suggest that Avicenna's metaphysics, given Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation of his core philosophical arguments,

provides a framework that clarifies and rationally elucidates the essential content, logical coherence, and philosophical integrity of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the existence and nature of God. Thus, examining the aspects of Avicenna's theology that Bahá'u'lláh affirms, far from being a merely academic exercise, will all the more reveal the implications, conceptual depth, and rational nature of Bahá'u'lláh's metaphysical and theological statements. Because Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá so consistently affirm, as will be seen, both Avicenna's terminology and the philosophical substance underlying that terminology, and reject opposing views in the history of Islamic thought in favor of Avicenna's, the deep study of Avicennian thought is relevant to discerning and articulating the principles of Bahá'í theology—a scholarly endeavor requiring that we examine the historical frameworks that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá employ or forego in describing Their distinctive theology.

This article thus aims to contribute to a discourse in scholarship on the Bahá'í Faith that deals with the relationship between Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and Avicenna's theological philosophy. Scholars have gestured before at the philosophical commonalities between Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and Avicenna's thought, even if Avicennian metaphysics has not been their primary subject of concern. William Hatcher, in his admirable book *Minimalism*, put forth an argument in formal logic for God's existence that consciously draws from Avicenna's insights, though he does not explicate in detail Avicenna's original argument. Juan Cole, in his monograph "The Concept of Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings," significantly states that Bahá'u'lláh "affirmed Avicenna's solution to the problem of the co-eternity of the universe with God," though it was beyond the aims of that work to treat Avicenna primarily. Ian Kluge likewise has warmly referenced Avicenna in a number of his outstanding essays on Bahá'í philosophy, stressing the commonality of Avicenna's rationalist and broadly Aristotelian worldview with the Bahá'í Faith's own philosophical presuppositions.

Keven Brown, similarly, has discussed some of Avicenna's views, along with those of other Islamic philosophers, in his papers "Abdu'l-Bahá's Response to Darwinism: Its Historical and Philosophical Context" and "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Response to the Doctrine of the Unity of Existence," even if Avicenna was not the primary philosopher under discussion. Vahid Rafati in "Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat: The Two Agents and the Two Patients" makes a useful reference to how Avicenna's account of the four elements relate to Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat*. Nader Saiedi likewise references the cosmology of Avicenna in his book *Gate of the Heart*, as does Moojan Momen in his paper "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics." Interestingly, however, Momen does not mention Avicenna in his article "The God of Bahá'u'lláh," favoring instead the Sufi Andalusian thinker Ibn 'Arabí.

This article therefore aims to contribute to this body of Bahá'í scholarship by investigating the elements of Avicenna's thought affirmed in the Bahá'í Faith, specifically engaging Avicenna's and Bahá'u'lláh's theological positions and analyzing their respective thought in three discrete parts. Part One, accordingly, treats Avicenna's argument for the existence of God as the *vájib al-vujúd* or "the Necessarily Existent," and seeks to demonstrate that Bahá'u'lláh affirms the basic metaphysical principles underlying Avicenna's argument for God's existence, validates his logical procedure, and corroborates his concept of God as an existentially or ontologically independent and transcendent first cause. Part Two then discusses Avicenna's deductive arguments for why such a first cause must be divine, successively treats each important attribute Avicenna ascribes to God, and argues that Bahá'u'lláh confirms Avicenna's account of respective divine attributes. Lastly, Part Three establishes that Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna, being in harmony with respect to their views on God's creative act and the eternal nature of the world, have central cosmological positions in common, and that Bahá'u'lláh consequently affirms characteristically Avicennian positions on God's relation to the world. The conclusion will sum up our findings, treat several possible objections, and likewise explain how the Avicennian ideas demonstrated to have been affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh are indeed meaningfully characteristic of Avicenna, and are not purely general features of Islamic thought—and that Avicenna, while certainly not being the only philosopher relevant to understanding the metaphysics treated in the Bahá'í Writings, is particularly important to Bahá'í studies because of his significant place in this history of philosophy and of Islamic thought, as well as the extensive degree to which his principles and arguments are represented in the Bahá'í Writings and help elucidate their metaphysical content.

These subjects will be addressed through analysis of the primary sources. These include a selection of Bahá'u'lláh's discrete epistolary works in Arabic and Persian, called *alváḥ* (tablets), such as his *Lawḥ-i-Basíṭ al-Ḥaqíqat* and *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat*, as well as the metaphysics (*iláhíyyát*) sections within two of Avicenna's philosophical compendia, the Arabic *ash-Shifá* and the Persian *Dánishnámiy-i-'Alá'í*, with occasional reference to Avicenna's Arabic *an-Naját*. Passages from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, meanwhile, will be analyzed in conjunction with those of Bahá'u'lláh as indispensable interpretative aids.1 Though official trans-

1 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretations of Bahá'u'lláh's theology are vital when analyzing Bahá'u'lláh's own views, insofar as 'Abdu'l-Bahá was specifically appointed by Bahá'u'lláh to explicate His teachings and preserve Bahá'ís from disagreement, as seen in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Kitáb-i-'Ahd, Súriy-i-Ghuṣn,* and *Lawḥ-i-'Arḍ-i-Bá.* Even from a secular point of view, therefore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretations represent authoritative explanations of Bahá'u'lláh's theology, and must

lations of the Bahá'í Writings will be used when available, extensive attention will be given, either in footnotes or the body of the text, to the precise wording of the Arabic or Persian original and the exact philosophical significance of particular words. All passages from Avicenna, however, are my own renderings, though they have benefited from reference to the pioneering translations published by Parviz Morewedge and Michael Marmura of the *Dánishnámih* and *ash-Shifá*, respectively. Marmura's bilingual publication of ash-Shifá's "Metaphysics" has been especially useful as an edited source of Avicenna's original Arabic.

In what follows, we shall begin by considering how Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna each argue for God's existence, a necessary point of departure before establishing the other areas of conceptual convergence.

## God as the Necessarily Existent

### Avicenna's Argument for the Necessarily Existent

The primary difference between theism and atheism lies perhaps in differing views of nature. According to the theist, there is a reality beyond and transcendent above the material universe and its phenomena—a *supernatural* and absolute reality that ultimately grounds the existence of the world, while remaining utterly sanctified from it. The atheist, conversely, believes that there is no supernatural reality, and asserts that nature is simply the whole of existence, and that any legitimate explanation of a thing must necessarily be a natural and not supernatural one. It follows on atheism, then, that the existence of nature itself can have no cause, grounds, or explanation. This is because one cannot explain the whole of nature and its existence through something that is itself part of nature and a natural phenomenon, bounded by space, time, and the limitations of matter. One can only explain, via antecedent physical causes, subsequent physical conditions, but not why the whole of nature should exist at all or, ultimately, anything whatsoever for which nonexistence is logically and metaphysically possible. Therefore, if nature is all there is, nature itself must be inexplicable, even if individual phenomena within it allow for proximate, but of course never ultimate, causes and explanations.

Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna both explicitly reject such naturalism, and insist that there is a transcendent and supernatural reality—God—which grounds the existence of the world. Bahá'u'lláh, in the *Lawḥ-i Ḥikmat*, writes on this theme:

> Those who have rejected God and firmly cling to Nature as it is in itself are, verily, bereft of knowledge and wisdom. They are truly of them that are far astray. They have failed to attain the lofty summit and have fallen short of the

be considered in any thorough analysis of Bahá'u'lláh's writings.

> ultimate purpose; therefore their eyes were shut and their thoughts differed, while the leaders among them have believed in God and in His invincible sovereignty . . . When the eyes of the people of the East were captivated by the arts and wonders of the West, they roved distraught in the wilderness of material causes, oblivious of the One Who is the Causer of Causes, and the Sustainer thereof . . . . (*Tablets* 143–44; *Maj'mú'iy-i-Alváḥ ba'd az Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 85)

And Avicenna, for his part in *ash-Shifá*, distinguishes between the natural and supernatural or divine orders of causality:

> The theistic philosophers do not mean by the term "efficient cause" what is merely the source and principle of a physical change, as the naturalists assert. Rather, they regard the efficient cause as that which is the source of a thing's existence and what imparts existence to it, even as God imparts existence absolutely to the world (and does not merely fashion it from pre-existing matter). (195)

Both Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna assert, therefore, the existence of some reality that is not contained in the natural order, and they will thus argue that nature itself is not a metaphysical ultimate. But why do they suppose that there is anything beyond the phenomenal world of nature? Avicenna, for his part, proposes an argument for the existence of God as just this sort of transcendental reality in the metaphysics section of his comprehensive philosophical compendium, *ash-Shifá*, specifically in the first chapter of Book Eight of the "Metaphysics." Some of the premises of the argument, however, find their grounding in other parts of the "Metaphysics," which will thus be referenced in giving a whole account of his argument.

Avicenna begins his reasoning by noting that there are some concepts which are "impressed in the soul in a primary way" (*ash-Shifá* 22). That is to say, there are certain ideas which are themselves so basic and self-evident that they cannot be proven or demonstrated, insofar as they are the fundamental ideas by which all other concepts might be demonstrated or defined. An example is the idea of *existence*. Avicenna points out that everyone, no matter the language spoken, understands in a basic way the meaning of the term *existence.* But any attempt to define *existence* itself or to demonstrate that there is such a thing as *existence* would fail, because one would have to assume the existence of something beforehand in order to use it subsequently to define or demonstrate the idea of existence. Any definition or demonstration would accordingly be circular and therefore invalid. We thus understand existence in itself as a primary idea, and not as something apprehended secondarily from other things.

Avicenna then states that the terms *necessary*, *possible*, and *impossible*

are likewise understood by the mind in a primary way—as basic concepts known intuitively and comprehended immediately. This is because any attempt to define the necessary, possible, and impossible falls prey to circularity just like trying to define existence does, for the definition of any one of these terms is inescapably made in reference to one or both of the other two. In defining what is *possible*, for instance, one might say that it is something that is neither *necessary*, such that it must be and cannot not be, while at the same time it is not something that is *impossible* in itself, such that it could never be, just as a four-sided triangle could never be. To define what is *necessary*, however, one must either say that "it is not possible to suppose its nonexistence, or that it is impossible to suppose it being any other way than it already is" (*ash-Shifá* 28).

In this way, Avicenna shows that the concepts of existence, necessity, possibility, and impossibility have self-evident and fundamental meanings that must be apprehended directly by the mind, for the only definitions they can accommodate are mutually referential. It is important for Avicenna to give an account of these terms at this juncture, since they will be central to his argument for God's existence, and also since his very subject here is metaphysics, which he defines as that branch of philosophy which studies being insofar as it is being. Accordingly, he must give an account of the basic terms he uses to describe existence.

Having done so, Avicenna can then proceed to analyze the different modes in which things exist, as he does in chapter six of Book One in *ash-Shifá*. Conceptually, existence can be divided into what is possible or contingent (*mumkin*) and what is necessary (*vájib*). What is inherently impossible[2] clearly does not and never shall exist, and thus existence can only be said of what is either necessary or possible. If the existence of a thing is possible, it may just as well exist as not exist, when considered in itself.[3] If it does exist, however, then its existence is, in some way, made actual or necessary by virtue of something else, that is through a cause. To use a favored example of Avicenna, a house, considered in itself, might just as well exist as not exist, and its existence is thus only possible in itself. But if a carpenter should assemble the proper materials and construct it, the house that was merely *possibly* or potentially existent would become *necessarily* existent and actual.

Avicenna makes an important point here. The house, once it exists in

2 As, for example, something that involves an essential contradiction or misuse of terms, such as an *unmarried bachelor* or a *round square*.

3 That is, considering something merely in terms of *what* it is. For example, the existence of a bachelor is not impossible, nor is it strictly necessary; there could be no bachelors. Simply given what a bachelor is, considered *in itself*, it is equally possible for there to be one or not to be one. For either of these two states of affairs to obtain, therefore, external causes are necessary.

actuality, is still only possibly or contingently existent in itself, insofar as it requires a cause for its existence. Thus, according to Avicenna, it is *necessarily existent through another* (*vájib al-vujúd bi-ghayrihi*) but only *possibly* or *contingently existent in itself* (*mumkin al-vujúd*). This is because the house, as a particular arrangement of matter, does not merely depend on its materials having been assembled by an agent at some point of time in the past; it also depends on the cohesion of its respective elements in the here and now—for without the cohesion of these parts, it could not exist. A water molecule may be presented as a contemporary example. Before any two hydrogen atoms and single oxygen atom cohere in a covalent bond, the existence of a certain water molecule is merely *possible*, its existence being contingent on the junction and cohesion of those atoms. But once the bond is established, the existence of that water molecule becomes actual and *necessary*—though its existence remains only possible or contingent in itself—insofar as the molecule was originated by a cause, depends in the present on the covalent bond, and may well cease to exist as a water molecule should the bond be broken. Consequently, the inevitable and intrinsic features of a contingently existent being are, first, its being originated, and second, its continuing dependence in the present on composition of some kind. Thus the water molecule does not, in itself, exist necessarily, but only contingently, though its existence is rendered necessary once its causes are present.

At this point in the trajectory of his thought, Avicenna is confident that there are things that exist, and that there are things whose existence is possible or contingent in itself and which may be made necessary and actual through a cause. Another theoretical division of being remains, however. If there are things that are *contingently* existent in themselves, could there be something that is *necessarily* existent not through another but in itself? Avicenna does not attempt to prove that there *is* something necessarily existent in itself (*vájib al-vujúd bi nafsihi*) until Book Eight of the "Metaphysics" in *ash-Shifá*. However, because the idea of the Necessarily Existent in Itself is central to Avicenna's theological vision, he thoroughly teases out the basic implications of such a reality early in *ash-Shifá* and also in the *Dánishnámih*, even before he formally attempts to demonstrate that the Necessarily Existent does in fact exist.

First, Avicenna makes it clear that the existence of what is contingently existent in itself, (*mumkin al-vujúd*), is not in itself necessary or impossible—it is thus possible. But it is clear that for the contingently existent actually to exist, and for its existence to be rendered necessary, it requires a cause. Avicenna justifies this claim in the *Dánishnámih*, chapter nineteen of the "Metaphysics," when he writes:

> As to whatever is contingent and only possible, its existence, considered in itself, has no preponderance over its non-existence.

> Its existence is therefore due to the existence of its cause, and its non-existence would be due to the non-existence of the cause. If it existed of itself without a cause, its existence would be necessary—not possible—in itself. Therefore, whatever is contingent and possible in itself requires a cause for its existence, and that cause is prior to it essentially (that is, not necessarily prior in time). (369)

Avicenna's point here is that the existence of something possible is logically equivalent to its non-existence: in itself, it could just as well exist as not exist. If it exists in actuality, therefore, its existence logically must have proceeded to it from another, something that acts as the determinative of its existence: a cause.[4]

If, then, what is possibly existent in itself requires a cause to exist in actuality, it is clear that what is necessarily existent in itself would not require a cause to exist. This is because its existence would not be logically equivalent to its non-existence, insofar as the necessarily existent in itself is not merely possible. If there is something that is truly necessary in itself, its actual existence would be necessary and essential to it and its non-existence impossible, in contrast to the contingently existent being whose existence and non-existence are both similarly possible. This, of course, does not yet show that there is such a thing as exists necessarily in itself; it merely shows that what is necessarily existent in itself would require no cause.

Yet the relevance of the concept of the Necessarily Existent, the *vájib al-vujúd*, might now be becoming clear in regard to its theological implications: if God exists, and if He is the creator of all things—a reality on which all other beings depend—it is clear that He Himself could not require a cause for His existence. If He did, He would not be God, but simply another *creature*, or created thing, among many. What Avicenna must now do is show that there is a first cause that does not itself have a cause, for such a thing would be identical to the Necessarily Existent. His formal argument for the existence of a first cause can be found in several places throughout his works, but significantly in Book Eight, chapters one to three of *ash-Shifá*, even as Daniel De Haan has noted, with a variation in *an-Naját*. The sketch of the argument below thus draws from

4 Avicenna's premise here should not be misconstrued as being an example of inductive reasoning, and criticized on that ground. He is not drawing a general rule by observing that contingent things in his experience do in fact have causes, and then concluding that this stands for *all* contingent beings. He is rather concluding *deductively* that if the innate possibility of a thing's existence is equal to the possibility of its non-existence, there must be something external to that thing to account for its existence, should it actually exist: a cause or sequence of causes. For Avicenna, the presence of the cause is a matter of logical necessity and is not, by any means, a generalized observation.

*ash-Shifá* as well as the *Dánishnámih*.

One important point before explaining Avicenna's argument for the Necessarily Existent as the first cause, however, is to clarify the ways in which, according to him, a cause may be said to be prior to an effect. A cause, of course, can be prior to an effect in time, even as the father must exist prior to his son in time. But in Avicenna's terminology, the father is not prior to his son as a cause essentially, (*muqaddam bi dh*átihi) but only temporally (*bi zamán*). This is because the son, whether as a child or a man, does not depend on the father for his continued existence, or his subsistence. The son, therefore, does not depend essentially on his father, for causal dependence on his father is not an essential or necessary property of the son. If the father dies, the son will continue to exist. This is because, according to Avicenna, the father is not actually the cause of the son's subsistence, but rather only of a certain aspect of the son's temporal origination, "the motion of the seed" (*ash-Shifá* 201). Thus, for Avicenna, the activity of a true cause is always concurrent with its effect (201).

A cause is essentially prior to its effect when they are concurrent, and the effect could not possibly exist without the sustaining activity of the cause. Avicenna states:

> When there are two things and the existence of the first does not derive from the second, then the first thing is prior in existence to the second thing. This holds true when the first thing has its existence either in itself or from a third thing, whereas the existence of the second derives from the first. Moreover, the existence of the second thing, in this scenario, is necessitated by the first, the second not being necessary in its essence, insofar as in itself it is only possible. Furthermore, this is allowing that the first thing, so long as it exists, necessitates the existence of the second thing. (*ash-Shifá* 126)

Avicenna then clarifies this rather technical explanation through an illustration. If Zayd is holding a key and his hand moves, the motion of the hand is clearly the cause of the motion of the key, while the motion of the key is clearly not the cause of the hand's motion. The motion of the hand is thus prior to that of the key essentially, even though the motion of each one is simultaneous with the other. The motion of the key is necessitated by, and essentially dependent on, the motion of the hand, while the hand's motion is neither necessitated by nor dependent on the key's motion. What is more, so long as the motion of the hand exists, so will that of the key.

In the *Dánishnámih*, Avicenna explains this idea of essential causal priority through the example of a house, which I used as an illustration earlier:

> The generality of people suppose that the cause of a thing is that which brings about its existence and once it has done so, the thing

> has no need of a cause. But they have put forth an empty proof and have been pleased with a misleading analogy. They argue that "whatever had begun to exist subsequently does not depend upon its cause, insofar as one does not make again what is already made." Their analogy is this: should someone make a house, it is not in need of another maker once it has been constructed. But this is their mistake: no one suggested that what is made needs to be made again. Rather, we say that what is made requires something to support and sustain it. But their analogy of the house betrays an evident error, for the carpenter is not the cause of the existence of the house, but is rather the cause of the motion of the wood and clay to a certain location, and that is precisely the meaning of *carpenter* and *constructor*. But the cause of the form of the house is the cohesion of its elements, and the nature of those elements that necessitates the persistence of the house in the form it has. (370)

If the true cause is always concurrent with its actual effect, then, any contingent being—anything that is only possibly existent in itself—depends upon a cause or causes in the here and now, and not merely upon a certain cause in the past that was part of its temporal origination. Thus, examples of causes that are essentially prior and effects essentially posterior include the Sun and the emission of light, fire and the emanation of heat, a sequence of movers and things moved (such as a series of gears), and the force that coheres the parts of a thing and the thing composed. Now, in these cases, the cause or source of the effect is in its essence independent of the effect, while the effect is essentially dependent on such a cause.

This is not merely a technical point that lacks wider relevance. This understanding of what the efficient cause consists in is vital to Avicenna's argument for a first cause that is necessarily existent, an argument in which the question of time is completely irrelevant. For when Avicenna then argues that there is indeed a first cause, he will be speaking solely in terms of efficient causes that are concurrent with their effects, and are ordered (*murattab*) in a sequence such that the causes are essentially—not temporally—prior to their effects, and the effects are essentially—not temporally—posterior to their causes. It is thus that he stresses, as Book Eight of the "Metaphysics" of *ash-Shifá* opens, that "the cause of a thing's existence is concurrent with it."

What, then, is Avicenna's argument for a first cause, itself independent of any cause and necessarily existent in itself? As we have seen, Avicenna first establishes that everything is either necessary or contingent in itself, and shows that all contingent beings—since they are merely possibly existent in themselves—require concurrent causes to exist in actuality. Avicenna then concludes that there must be a

necessarily existent being, since there cannot be an infinite series of concurrent contingent causes; any causal chain must therefore terminate in a necessarily existent being, on which the entire causal sequence depends, and which itself depends on no cause. He thus writes that if one "supposes an effect and its cause, and for that cause a cause, there cannot be for every cause yet another cause *ad infinitum*" (*ash-Shifá* 258).

Avicenna justifies this claim, in *ash-Shifá*, by having the reader meditate on a theoretical sequence of essentially ordered causes simultaneous in time (258). If, for example, *a* is the cause of *b*, and *b* is the cause of *c*, then *a* is the absolute cause of the effects *b* and *c*, while *b* acts as an intermediate cause between the extreme cause *a* and the extreme effect *c*. Each member in this sequence would have a special characteristic, *a* as absolute cause of the succeeding members of the sequence, *b* as intermediate cause, and *c* as ultimate effect. Now, no matter how many more members are added between the absolute cause and the ultimate effect, the characteristic of intermediacy is still a feature of the causes succeeding *a* and preceding *c*. Thus, if the ultimate effect is not *c* but *z,* such that the sequence is now *a*, *b*, *c*, *d*, . . . *z*, the mere addition of more causes does not exempt them, as a sum, from the characteristic of intermediacy. The important point here is that all intermediate contingent causes, precisely because they are intermediate, will essentially depend and be contingent on an absolute cause, no matter how many more intermediate causes are added to the sequence. If there were no absolute cause, the sum of intermediate causes would lack the concurrent cause that it, due its contingency, requires. This absolute cause, however, cannot itself be contingent; if it were, it would itself have a cause, and would therefore be yet another intermediate cause added to the sum, and not the absolute cause that the sum requires. One consequently must conclude, as Avicenna writes, that "[t]here cannot be a sum of causes without there being a causeless cause, a first cause" (*ash-Shifá* 258). This first cause is therefore not contingent, but necessarily existent of itself, and there thus exists a necessarily existent being.

In *an-Naját*, meanwhile, Avicenna defends the need for a necessarily existent cause in slightly simpler terms (300). There, Avicenna points out that the causal sequence of concurrent contingent causes is a composite, and since composites are contingent, any sum of concurrent contingent causes itself requires a cause in order to exist. It depends on its parts to exist, and those parts are themselves contingently existent; the sum is therefore contingent—an argument mirrored in *ash-Shifá* when he writes, "whatever is dependent on what is caused is also caused" (*ash-Shifá* 258). The cause of the sum of concurrent contingent causes cannot itself be contingent, however. If it were, it would just be part of the sum itself and the cause of its own existence—an impossibility. There must be a cause, therefore, that is *external*

to the sum of contingent causes, and which is therefore not contingent at all, but necessarily existent in itself. "Contingent beings thus terminate," so Avicenna writes, "in a cause that is necessarily existent. There is not, therefore, for every contingent being a contingent cause *ad infinitum*" (*an-Naját* 301). It is this reality, then—the Necessarily Existent—that causes, and bestows existence on, the whole of contingent being at every moment. Importantly, if one were to counter that, given infinite time, an infinite sequence of contingent causes is possible, the objection would have no bearing on Avicenna's argument. This is because Avicenna is discussing *concurrent* causes, as we have seen, and is thus answering the question of how any contingent being or the whole of contingent being can exist in the here and now, given its intrinsically dependent and non-necessary reality. To this question, Avicenna answers that such contingent being exists because it is ceaselessly caused and sustained by a necessarily existent and independent reality.

Though this argument, in either of the two forms, may seem complex from the foregoing pages, this is merely because Avicenna's basic premises required a thorough explanation. In summary, the argument may be presented as follows with nine premises, themselves supported by the arguments above, leading to a final conclusion. (For brevity, "necessary" and "contingent" will be used in place of the more technical "necessary" or "contingent *in itself*").

1. Whatever exists is either necessary or contingent.
2. Whatever is contingent has a concurrent cause of its existence.
3. Whatever is necessary exists independent of any cause.
4. A causal sum of concurrent contingent causes is itself contingent.
5. Therefore, such a causal sum has a concurrent cause of its existence (from 2, 4).
6. The concurrent cause of such a causal sum is either necessary or contingent (from 1).
7. If a causal sum has no necessary cause, it will have contingent concurrent causes *ad infinitum*.
8. A causal sum cannot have contingent concurrent causes *ad infinitum*.
9. Consequently, the causal sum does have a necessary cause (from 7, 8).
10. Therefore, there is something necessary and independent of any cause (from 3, 9).

## The Necessarily Existent in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings

Avicenna thus demonstrates the existence of something necessarily existent in itself. His proposition that a sum of concurrent members subsists by virtue of those members and thus only contingently is almost self-evident. It appears, therefore, that his strongest claim is found in premise two: "whatever is

contingent requires a concurrent cause for its existence." We have previously seen the logical problems in supposing otherwise, and as such Avicenna's argument represents a remarkably elegant and powerful logical argument—proceeding from an analysis of existence itself into model categories—for something necessarily existent. I will not address here, however, all possible objections to Avicenna's argument, insofar as my larger purpose is to show that Bahá'u'lláh affirms his concept of the divine.[5]

The question before us now concerns the theological implications of Avicenna's proof and how it relates to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about God. First of all, essential to the idea of God is that He is the creator of all things, something metaphysically ultimate on which the existence of all other things depends, and who Himself depends on nothing for His existence—God is something beyond and independent of the phenomenal and contingent order of nature. The central idea of God, as Avicenna's analysis shows, is that He is something necessarily existent in Himself. This—as will be demonstrated through quoted passages—is precisely what Bahá'u'lláh says regarding God. In this vein, Bahá'u'lláh explicitly terms God *vájib*, necessarily existent, in a short but comprehensive Persian tablet (*Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 338–42), in which He likewise refers to creation as consisting of *mumkinát*, contingent beings, only possibly existent in themselves. This tablet is partially translated in *Gleanings* by Shoghi Effendi, and since he variously translated the term *mumkinát*, I will indicate it below with parentheses. Bahá'u'lláh states in the beginning of the tablet:

> All praise to the unity of God, and all honor 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 (*mumkinát*) . . . 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. Nothing short of His all-encompassing grace, His all-pervading mercy, could have possibly achieved it. How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being?
>
> Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein (*kull-i-mumkinát*) . . . . (64–65)

Here Bahá'u'lláh identifies creation with what is contingently existent, using precisely the same Arabic-Persian term—*mumkinát* or contingent beings—as Avicenna. Bahá'u'lláh literally states that it is by God that *all*

5 For a similar, though distinct, appraisal of which of Avicenna's premises are the most ontologically robust, see McGinnis, 166.

contingent beings (*kull-i-mumkinát*) have their existence, even as it is the Necessarily Existent, for Avicenna, that sustains the existence of any contingent being in the here and now. Bahá'u'lláh implies here that God must exist, insofar as contingent reality could only derive from something that is ontologically superior to it; there must be something existentially superior to the world of contingent beings to ground it and to cause its existence—something that is, by implication, necessarily existent.

For Bahá'u'lláh, it is evident that contingent beings could not precede from "sheer nothingness," and in themselves do not even have "the capacity to exist." They must depend, therefore, on what is not contingent but necessary. In itself, contingent being is characterized only by "the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction," and accordingly must be "rescued" by a transcendent reality in order to subsist at all. Here we see, implicit in Bahá'u'lláh's account, the vital distinction between what is necessarily and what is only contingently existent, for it is by the former that the latter has its being, while the former in itself is independent of all else. Accordingly and significantly, in this same Tablet Bahá'u'lláh soon identifies God explicitly with what is necessarily existent, using the term *vájib*, technically meaning "necessary," just as Avicenna did. Bahá'u'lláh states that "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 (*ḥádiṯ*) and the Eternal (*qadím*), the contingent (*mumkin*) and the Absolute (*vájib*)" (*Gleanings* 66; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 28). Bahá'u'lláh thus confirms the same metaphysical principles, the distinction between contingent and necessary existence, and the need to appeal to the latter to explain the former, that Avicenna employed to demonstrate God's reality as the Necessarily Existent.

This language distinguishing between the necessary and the contingent in reference respectively to God and His creation is central to this work of Bahá'u'lláh, and its centrality to Bahá'u'lláh's theological vision in general is clearly realized as soon as one notes that the term *imkán*, literally signifying the realm of contingent existence, is used in reference to creation ubiquitously in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, even as mention of *mumkinát*—contingent beings—is unavoidable in most any prayer, tablet, or epistle from Him. As such, the *Lawḥ-i Ḥikmat* opens with: "This is an Epistle which the All-Merciful hath sent down from the Kingdom of Utterance. It is truly a breath of life unto those who dwell in the realm of creation (*imkán*). Glorified be the Lord of all worlds!" (*Tablets* 137; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ ba'd az Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 80). Likewise, the Long Obligatory Prayer enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh states: "Thou seest me turning toward Thee, and rid of all attachment to anyone save Thee, and clinging to Thy cord, through whose movement the whole creation (*mumkinát*) hath been stirred up" (*Prayers*

*and Meditations* 317; *Ad'íyyiy-i-Ḥaḍrat-i-Maḥbúb* 65).

These are but two examples among myriad of Bahá'u'lláh's identification of creation with contingent being, with its implied attribution of necessity to God. We may further consider, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the Kitáb-i-Íqán in which He stresses God's ontological distinction from *mumkinát* or contingent beings, insofar as they have an intrinsic dependence upon Him: "No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures (*mumkinát*) . . . 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" (63).

In yet another work, Bahá'u'lláh again stresses, using precise metaphysical language, that God utterly transcends contingent existence. He thus explicitly validates, beyond any mere coincidence of terminology, the content of Avicenna's central distinction between that which is necessarily existent in itself, being God, and what exists within the constraint of contingent being, namely, the creation. Bahá'u'lláh thus asserts: "the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of anyone besides Him. Whatsoever in the contingent world can either be expressed or apprehended, can never transgress the limits which, by its inherent nature, have been imposed upon it. God, alone, transcendeth such limitations" (*Gleanings* 150–51; *Iqtidárát* 72–73). Here, "whatsoever in the contingent world can either be expressed or apprehended" translates the Persian *ánchih dar maqám-i-mumkin*, literally "whatsoever is in the station of the contingent (*mumkin*)"; such a thing, Bahá'u'lláh says, is *maḥdúd*, or limited, by *ḥudúdát-i-imkáníyyih*, the limitations pertaining to the contingent realm, or the constraints of contingency. According to Bahá'u'lláh, God alone transcends such limitations. As such, Bahá'u'lláh here explicates the ontological gulf between God and His creation in the Persian text by explicitly characterizing creation as being "in the station of the contingent," while He implicitly affirms the necessary existence of God by saying that He alone transcends such constraints of contingency.

This language of necessity and contingency with its accompanying logic continues through the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who even repeats a kind of argument from contingency in which reasoning similar to Avicenna's appears in the eloquent brevity of a single sentence: "So long as the contingent world is characterized by dependency, and so long as this dependency is one of its essential requirements, there must be One Who in His own Essence is independent of all things" (*Some Answered Questions* 6; *Mufávaḍát* 4). That 'Abdu'l-Bahá appeals to the contingent nature of the world to argue for God's existence, as an ontologically independent reality, shows that He validates the basic metaphysical principles

underlying Avicenna's argument for God, and that His use of a term like "contingent" is likewise no mere coincidence of terminology, but rather a substantive affirmation of the concept of creation's inherent contingency and God's ontological necessity.

'Abdu'l-Bahá furthermore uses the very term necessarily existent (*vujúb*) in explicit reference to God, such as when He says that God is absolutely one and indivisible insofar as the divine reality "admits of no division, for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things, and not accidents impinging upon the Necessary Being (*vujúb*)" (*Some Answered Questions* 127; *Mufávaḍát* 27). Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that such things as "we affirm for creation to be among the requirements of origination we deny in God; for to be sanctified and exalted above all imperfections is one of the characteristics of the Necessary Being (*vujúb*)" (*Some Answered Questions* 339; *Mufávaḍát* 204). He asserts, moreover, that "whatever is originated, in respect to its existence and conditions, requires the effluence of being that emanates from the Necessarily Existent" (*Khitábát* 2:6, provisional translation).[6]

Clearly, Avicenna's modal metaphysics is not merely incidental to these passages from Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The significance of calling creation "the contingent world," of calling created things "contingent beings," of referring to God as "necessary" and "One Who in His own Essence is independent of all things"—the significance of such expressions is utterly lost without an understanding of that metaphysical world-picture rationally argued for by Avicenna and an appreciation of its attendant terms of contingency and necessity. This fact illustrates the relevance of analyzing the Avicennian positions affirmed in the Bahá'í Writings to understand the theological teachings contained in them.

Another example of this point can be seen when, right next to the terms *necessary* and *contingent*, Bahá'u'lláh calls God *qadím* and creation *ḥádiṯh*: "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 (*ḥádiṯh*) and the Eternal (*qadím*), the contingent (*mumkin*) and the Absolute (*vájib*)" (*Gleanings* 66; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 340).Though *qadím* is generally and rightly translated as *eternal*, it alludes to those philosophical points about causation that we considered in the first section of this paper. In this connection, *qadím* comes from the same root as *muqaddam*, which signifies "being prior," whether in time or in essential independence, from the *ḥádiṯh*, an effect or phenomenon (translated as "transient" above). It is accordingly in the full sense of a cause's essential priority to its effect, as Avicenna explains, that Bahá'u'lláh here employs the term *qadím* in reference to God and *ḥádiṯh* with respect to created

6 All provisional translations in this article are by the author.

things, insofar as according to both Avicenna and Bahá'u'lláh creation is co-eternal with God but essentially and ceaselessly dependent on Him—as will be explored in Part Three of this article. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh not only stresses the necessary existence of God and the contingency of His creatures, but also alludes to His being essentially prior to them, as the ultimate and unconditioned cause of all other things at all times, as Avicenna argued.

Moreover, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in chapter eighty of *Mufávaḍát* or *Some Answered Questions*, Himself provides a detailed presentation of essential and temporal priority, as well as the dependent and originated nature of an effect (*ḥudúth*), that precisely mirrors Avicenna's own explanations; this again indicates His support for the metaphysical account of causation underlying Avicenna's argument for God. In this light, Bahá'u'lláh likewise uses the term *ḥudúth* to refer to created things' essential contingency and their fundamental insignificance when compared with God's necessary and unconditioned existence: "how utterly contemptible must every contingent (*ḥudúth*) and perishable thing appear when brought face to face with the uncreated, the unspeakable glory of the Eternal" (*Gleanings* 187–88; qtd. in Dávúdí 131).

Even when Bahá'u'lláh uses terms other than *vájib* in reference to the nature of God's existence, the evident meaning remains that God is necessarily existent in Himself and essentially independent—an indication that He not only uses the terminology of Avicenna, but also affirms the meaning underlying it. "That primal Essence," Bahá'u'lláh assures us in the *Lawḥ-i-Tawḥíd*, "subsists (*qá'im*) by virtue of its own self" (*Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 313, provisional translation). Similarly, in the Short Obligatory prayer enjoined by Bahá'u'lláh, one reads: "I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, *the Self-Subsisting* (*al-qayyúm*)" (*Prayers and Meditations* 314; *Ad'íyy-iy-i-Ḥaḍrat-i-Maḥbúb* 74). In addition, when explaining the immortality of the human soul, Bahá'u'lláh distinguishes between the everlasting existence of the soul, which is nonetheless contingent, temporal and thus dependent on a cause, and the eternal existence of God, which is necessary, absolute, unconditioned and essential to Him, and thus in need of no cause. He states:

> When the soul attaineth the Presence of God, it will assume the form that best befitteth its immortality and is worthy of its celestial habitation. Such an existence is a contingent and not an absolute existence, inasmuch as the former is preceded by a cause, whilst the latter is independent thereof. Absolute existence is strictly confined to God, exalted be His glory. (*Gleanings* 157; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 164–65)

The term translated as "absolute existence" is *baqáy-i-dhátí*, which

literally signifies *essential existence*. Because God exists necessarily of Himself without need of anything external to Him, His existence is essential to His nature, and is accordingly *absolute*, as Shoghi Effendi perceptively translated, insofar as it is not contingent on, or conditioned by, anything whatsoever. Since this "essential existence" is not preceded by or dependent on a cause—whereas non-essential existence is—Bahá'u'lláh is clearly distinguishing between existence which is essential to something and thus necessary, and existence which is incidental, derived from a cause, and thus contingent to a thing. As such, it is this necessary existence, not dependent on a cause, which He says is "strictly confined to God."

In this passage, therefore, Bahá'u'lláh carefully explicates the metaphysical notions of contingent and necessary being, and what they entail for the nature of God and His creatures, and consequently affirms the conceptual core of Avicenna's argument for God and subsequent conception of the Divine in its essential form. Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes a precise distinction, like Avicenna, between the conditional and hence contingent existence of creatures and the necessary existence of God, when He explicitly states in one place that existence is "of two kinds," that of God and that of *khalq* or creation. While the existence of God, He explains, is preceded by and dependent on no cause whatsoever, being absolute and eternally and independently subsistent, the kind of existence creatures possess is radically different in being causally dependent and conditioned (*Muntakhabátí* 1:58–59). From the above points, therefore, we may safely conclude that Bahá'u'lláh, along with 'Abdu'l-Bahá, recognizes and affirms the Avicennian distinction between contingent and necessary existence, and identifies God with the Necessarily Existent. The above points also showcase how an understanding of the metaphysical principles Avicenna uses in his argument for God's existence illuminate the meaning of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements—Their own arguments in favor of God's existence and clarifications of His nature.

Nevertheless, the concept of the Necessarily Existent that Avicenna proposes may initially seem too conceptually bare to be easily identified with God, particularly the full and lively God of Bahá'u'lláh. Though the concept of God presented by Bahá'u'lláh clearly entails that He exists necessarily and not merely contingently, we have yet to see the full rational justification for why, in Avicenna's metaphysics, something necessarily existent in itself should be recognized as divine and as the single reality worthy of the term *divinity*. The object of the following part of this paper, therefore, is to explore how a rich theological picture emerges from the idea of absolute necessity, and how the attributes of divinity can be logically deduced therefrom in Avicenna's system. We will see, meanwhile, an even greater convergence between Avicenna's arguments and Bahá'u'lláh's statements, as well as

the explanations of the latter's son and successor, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

## The Divine Attributes

In the foregoing pages, we reviewed Avicenna's argument for God as the Necessarily Existent, and demonstrated that in Bahá'u'lláh's view God, as Avicenna stresses, is indeed characterized by necessary existence. What remains to be shown, therefore, is twofold. First, we must elucidate the rationale behind Avicenna's assertion that the Necessarily Existent is indeed God by explaining how he deduces further divine attributes from the idea of necessary existence. We will do this by considering the divine attributes of *simplicity*, *singleness*, *immutability*, *eternality*, *perfection*, *goodness*, *intellect*, *will*, and *infinitude*, each of which is significant in Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and Avicenna's thought. Second, we must ascertain whether Bahá'u'lláh accepts Avicenna's account of the divine attributes, in order to determine further how Bahá'u'lláh affirms Avicennian principles and how understanding those Avicennian principles illuminates the nature, and rational character, of Bahá'u'lláh's own teachings on the nature of God. Such, then, is the object of the second part of this paper.

In order to contextualize the discussion of divine attributes that follows, we can note at the outset that a conceptual analysis of the Necessarily Existent shows the stark disparity and categorical distinction between it and contingent beings. The prime method of establishing God's attributes, therefore, in both the Bahá'í Writings and Avicenna's work, is the apophatic approach of negative theology, by which properties that are characteristic of created and contingent beings as such are *negated* from God. In this light, God is the one reality that transcends the conditioned, contingent, caused, and mutable order of nature, and is thus absolute and sanctified from the multiplicity of attributes that are distinctive of contingent beings. By this method of negation, a fuller understanding emerges of what necessary existence logically entails, and what it must preclude, with the result that one comes to know God by virtue of what He is not, such as when one asserts that He is eternal (not in time), necessary (not contingent), one (not multiple), and so on.

A related principle to bear in mind—one whose justification will become evident once the concept of *simplicity* has been discussed—is that for Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna the divine attributes treated in this part are not discrete and separate properties that characterize God. Each one, rather, is a different construal of His necessary existence. We saw, for instance, in this article's first part that the Necessarily Existent has no cause. If it needed a cause to exist, it would not be necessarily existent in itself. Insofar as we conclude that there is a first causeless cause, we can determine that it is identical to the Necessarily Existent, for it would require

a cause if it were merely possible in itself. And yet, although being necessarily existent and being independent of any cause are distinct propositions, the reality they point to is the same, as each predication is fully identical to, or convertible into, the other. Similarly, each of the attributes spoken of will not constitute a discrete entity in God, but will serve as a way of deducing the logical consequences of *necessary existence*. This is by way of *negating* from the Necessarily Existent the attributes peculiar to contingent beings, as described above, rather than affirming of it a plurality of discrete properties, as Avicenna stresses:

> God has attributes whose meaning is negative, such that when we say that God is "one," for example, we mean that His reality is such that He has no peer, or that He is not composed of parts. Similarly, when we say He is eternal, we mean that His existence has no beginning, but these two attributes—oneness and eternity—do not bring about any multiplicity in His essence. (*Dánishnámih* 381)

It is in this light that 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, as seen earlier, that such things as "we affirm for creation to be among the requirements of origination we deny in God; for to be sanctified and exalted above all imperfections is one of the characteristics of the Necessary Being (*vujúb*)" (*Some Answered Questions* 339; *Mufávaḍát* 204).

## Simplicity

The above point—that in God there is no multiplicity—is especially apparent from an understanding of the attribute of simplicity. It is discussed first because it is arguably the most vital to comprehend in order for one to understand the God of Avicenna and, likewise, the God of Bahá'u'lláh. In sum, simplicity means that the Necessarily Existent is incomposite and absolutely one in its essence—it has no component parts. Simplicity stands in contrast to complexity, which entails the composition of multiple parts as well as a variety of real ontological disjunctions and various internal aspects cohering within an entity. But, as Avicenna explains (*Dánishnámih* 368–69 and 374–75), the Necessarily Existent must be simple because it has no cause for its existence, nor for its being the way that it is. For if the Necessarily Existent were composed of different parts, then it would depend on those parts, and on some principle by which they would cohere, in order to exist. In such a case, its existence would be contingent and not necessary—contingent, that is, on a range of parts and on something to cause them to come together so as to sustain the subsistence of the complex entity. If this were so, then it would only be possibly existent in itself and not necessary. It would not be something metaphysically ultimate, for anything that depends on composition is definitionally not the absolute terminus of causal explanation, insofar as it

depends on ontologically more fundamental elements.[7]

Another way to reason out the simplicity of the Necessarily Existent is this: if the Necessarily Existent did have parts, would those parts be necessarily existent in themselves? If they were not necessarily existent in themselves, then what they would compose clearly could not be necessarily existent, for "what is dependent on what is caused is also caused" (*ash-Shifá* 258). But if we did conceive these parts each as necessarily existent, there would still have to be a cause or principle by means of which they would join together and form the Necessarily Existent being whose existence we initially deduced. But such a complex being would not be necessarily existent, for it would still be dependent for its existence on the composition of separate elements as well as some external principle to unite those elements; it thus would not be fundamental and necessary in itself. Consequently, something cannot be composed of necessary entities and remain necessarily existent in itself.[8]

Thus, the Necessarily Existent cannot have any parts, nor can it entail any composition. Consequently, there could be no discrete physical parts in the Necessarily Existent, and it could not be something extended in three dimensions. For Avicenna, however, there are deeper, metaphysical ways in which something could be a composite in contrast to being a simple entity. Namely, something could be a composite of *actuality* and *potentiality*, *matter* and *form*, *essence* and *existence*. We will thus successively explore the significance of each of these pairs in Avicenna's thought.

First, with regard to actuality and potentiality, Avicenna accepts Aristotle's fundamental postulate, articulated in Book Nine of his *Metaphysics*, that something is either actual or potential, and that causation, change or origination involves the actualization of a potential. In fact, Avicenna assimilates this Aristotelian insight into his division of existence into the modalities of necessity and possibility. For Avicenna, whatever can possibly exist must be said to exist in some way or other, whether in actuality or in potentiality, even as he expresses in the *Dánishnámih*: "When it is possible for something to exist but it still does not exist, the possibility of its existence while it is nonexistent is called potentiality" (363). When a possibly existent thing comes into existence, it passes from potentiality into actuality. However, such a thing does not have actuality in

7 This same logic, as we discussed earlier, showed us that composition is a feature strictly confined to contingent beings. Composition entails the existence of something prior to the composed thing, something more basic which supports, causes, and sustains its existence. The Necessarily Existent, then, must be entirely void of such composition.

8 Avicenna's demonstration that in principle there could only be one necessarily existent reality is discussed in the section "Singleness."

itself but must be actualized by a cause; insofar, then, as a contingent being can change or revert to nonexistence, it is not pure, self-subsistent actuality, but rather is partly actual (as actualized by its cause or causes) and partly potential due to its inherent contingency.

Consequently, things that are caused or mutable are composites of actuality and potentiality, actual and potential existence. That is, a contingent being, say a tree, is *actually* one way and *potentially* another. Part of a tree's contingency entails that it has potentiality—it can potentially exist or not exist; it can potentially be fertile green or withered brown; it can potentially grow or diminish. Conversely, it actually is one way or another at any particular time, and that current actuality is made actual, or necessary, by some cause or other. The tree, accordingly, is not purely actual or necessary in itself, but is subject to causes and has potentials that may or may not become actualized. Metaphysically, therefore, the tree is a composite of actual and potential existence: existence as necessitated by its causes and existence as merely possible in itself.

But Avicenna writes in *ash-Shifá*, "Whatever is necessarily existent by its own essence is necessarily existent in every aspect" (30). This is because if the Necessarily Existent had any potentiality, if any *part* of its existence were not already fully actual and necessary but potential and contingent, it would not be necessarily existent in itself. In itself, that part would only be possibly existent and would require a cause to become actually existent. If that potential in it were actualized by a cause, then the being of the Necessarily Existent would not be fully necessary in itself but necessitated by a cause. This, of course, is a contradiction. Alternatively, if one part of its existence were actual in itself, and another part potential, the former would have no need of the latter to exist. That former would then be the true Necessarily Existent, in which case it could not be subject to an external cause to join it to something only potentially existent, nor would it make sense to say that what is necessary in itself depends on a part that is only possibly existent in itself.[9]

Hence, the Necessarily Existent is no composite of actuality and potentiality, but fully actual and necessarily so—not upon the condition of anything else; it is thus wholly unconditioned, absolute, and free of any metaphysical composition. The simplicity of its existence inevitably entails that it is one thing and one thing only, in complete actuality and necessity—pure actuality with no potentiality. In classical terms, it is pure *act* with no *potency*.

Similarly, Avicenna explains that the Necessarily Existent could not be a composite of *matter* and *form*:

9 Likewise, and stated more simply, the Necessarily Existent can have no potentiality, for then it would have an actual part and a potential part, and then it would not be fundamentally irreducible and independent of the composition of more basic elements.

> There cannot be any multiplicity in the Necessarily Existent, such that its existence becomes actualized due to a multiplicity of things, even as the body of man is. Nor can things be divisions within it, each part subsisting in its own right, like the wood and clay of a house. Nor can there be divisions within it that are conceptually separate though not in essence, even as matter and form are conceptually separate in natural bodies, for in that case the essence of the Necessarily Existent would be a composite and admit of association with causes, as has been shown. (*Dánishnámih* 374)

The full significance of the Necessarily Existent's not being a composite of matter and form similarly depends on some understanding of Aristotelian metaphysics and its view of causation, the basic structure of which Avicenna adopts and defends. In brief, the Aristotelian account presents four kinds of cause: the efficient, the formal, the material, and the final. The efficient cause is already familiar from the discussions in Part One; it is the agent, the source of a change in a thing (such as when a stove imparts heat to water) or the existence of a thing (as when the motion of the hand creates the motion of the key being held). The formal cause, however, is the essential form and nature or functional organization of a thing, which makes it actually the thing that it is. Conversely, the material cause is the matter, the raw potentiality, that receives the form and is actualized by it, as wax receives the impression of the seal. Lastly, the final cause is the purpose of a thing, or its *end*, the state that it is directed towards by virtue of its particular nature, the realization of which constitutes its good.[10]

The Necessarily Existent, in not depending upon causes, clearly does not have an existence that is realized by virtue of any one of these four causes. As such, the Necessarily Existent could have neither a material nor formal cause: it could not be comprised of matter, some basic stuff with the potentiality of being actualized in a particular form. If this were the case, it would not be necessarily, but only possibly, existent. Accordingly, even as it is not a composite of discernible discrete parts, or of actuality and potentiality, the Necessarily Existent cannot be a composite of matter and form. It follows logically, then, that it must be immaterial, for, otherwise, it would be a contingent entity composed of two metaphysical parts: matter and form. Matter would represent its potentiality, form its actuality, and it, as a being whose existence has been realized, would be dependent on those causes, the material cause and the formal cause, as well as some agent, the efficient cause, to actualize the substrate of matter into some concrete form. This, of course, is impossible for the Necessarily Existent, for it is dependent on no cause whatsoever.

10 Significantly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá likewise validates the Aristotelian theory of the four causes; see chapter eighty of *Mufávaḍát*.

Given, therefore, that the Necessarily Existent is immaterial, it cannot even be conceived as a uniform and homogeneous substance existing in three-dimensional space; rather, it is something that altogether transcends space and the material world. Consequently, it is void of all the incidental attributes particular to material entities, which include subsisting in space; being situated in three dimensions; exhibiting weight, mass, position, and locomotion; and so forth. Immateriality is thus a logical consequence both of necessary existence and simplicity.

There remains, however, yet another and even more fundamental level at which the Necessarily Existent is properly understood as absolutely simple. This involves Avicenna's famous distinction between *essence* and *existence*. For Avicenna, contingent beings are composed of *essence* and *existence*, and their essence is conceptually and metaphysically distinct from their existence. In other words, for Avicenna, the fact *that something is* distinct from *what* something is. The essence of a thing is its quiddity, its *máhíyyat*, the *whatness* that defines it. An essence is what makes an entity the thing it is and not some other thing. For example, the essence of a triangle—triangularity—determines that any triangle has three sides and three sides only, internal angles whose sum is 180 degrees, and so forth. A triangle is not a square; the two shapes are *essentially* different. To use a more concrete example, the *essence* of water could be construed as that reality by which it manifests the attributes peculiar to water: its inherent nature. Water, as $H_2O$, has properties that neither of its elements, hydrogen and oxygen, has alone, and its attributes are not a mere sum of hydrogen's and oxygen's discrete properties. Water has a unique set of properties, such as being capable of existing in gas, liquid, and solid states in a narrow range of temperatures. Water is thus essentially or intrinsically different from other elements.

The important point is that Avicenna recognizes that, for any contingent being, whether it exists must be a distinct consideration from what definitionally constitutes what it is. This is because there is nothing entailed by the essence of any contingent being that will demonstrate to someone that it exists in actuality. The essence of a human being, for example, may be defined, as it was classically at least since Aristotle, as a *rational animal*. If the essence of the human being, then, is to be a rational animal, it is clear that this remains a fact even if all human beings become extinct. Likewise, even if humans had never emerged, that would not have changed the fact that the human essence is to be a rational animal. One cannot know whether any human exists simply by investigating what constitutes the human essence; instead, one must empirically determine whether humans exist in the present, or deduce their existence indirectly from their effects, insofar as their existence is not logically necessary but contingent and incidental to their essence.

Avicenna, in addition, has a briefer proof of the distinction between essence and existence in *aṣh-Shifá*. His proof rests on the idea that, if essence and existence were not distinct, then even some of the simplest propositions would revert to bare tautologies. He explains:

> It is evident that for everything there is a reality particular to it, and this is what constitutes its essence. Likewise, it is clear that the reality particular to each thing is distinct from its existence. This is because it is intelligible to say that the reality of something does exist in a concrete way, or as apprehended in the mind, or absolutely as common to both. But it is vain and useless to say that the reality of something is the reality of something, or that the reality of something is a reality. (24)

Though Avicenna continues with his explanation, his main point is that, while a statement such as "the essence of man exists (either concretely or as conceived by a mind)" is meaningful in that the predicate reveals something more about the subject, to say "the essence of man is the essence of man" or "the essence of man is an essence" is a mere restatement. The predicate, in that case, reveals nothing more about the subject. This shows, for Avicenna, that there is a distinction between essence and existence. Otherwise, to say that a particular essence *exists* would not convey anything more about that essence. It is thus that saying "the essence is an existent" differs from saying "the essence is an essence."

This distinction between essence and existence moreover clarifies why a contingent being is only possibly existent in itself. Because of the distinction between essence and existence, a contingent being cannot derive existence from its own essence; it therefore does not have existence in and of itself, that is, from its own nature and essence. It must therefore receive existence from something other than its essence, from something beyond itself: an external cause. As a case in point, although *triangularity* is the essence of a triangle, and although no triangle can exist without that essence, what Avicenna would call the *formal cause*, no concrete triangle can exist without an efficient cause, some external factor imparting existence to it, say, the geometrician who draws it and creates it as a particular triangle. Because contingent beings evince, in this way, a real distinction between essence and existence, they are only possibly and not necessarily existent, insofar as they do not exist simply given what they are. Accordingly, every existent contingent being evinces a fundamental composition, a composition that immediately points to the conditional, dependent, and derivative nature of its being: the composition of essence and existence. A composite of essence and existence is not metaphysically fundamental and self-sufficient, but rather relies on something else for its being and origination.

It then follows that, unlike each member of the totality of contingently existent beings, the Necessarily Existent could not be such a composite of essence and existence. As Avicenna deftly argues in the *Dánishnámih*: "Whatever has an essence other than its own existence is not necessarily existent. For if the essence of a thing is not its own existence, its existence would have the characteristic of being an incidental, and not essential, feature to it. Any incidental feature, moreover, has a cause" (377). The Necessarily Existent is thus nothing other than necessary existence, nothing other than absolute being. Therefore, it has no essence distinct from its existence, and in this sense one may say that the Necessarily Existent has no essence, insofar as it does not have an essence distinct from its act of existence. In this connection Avicenna writes: "The Necessarily Existent has no essence; it is rather from Him that existence emanates onto those things that have essences. It is pure being from which all privation and description is negated" (*ash-Shifá* 276). Yet Avicenna also writes that, in another sense, the Necessarily Existent's essence *is* its existence: "The Necessarily Existent has no essence apart from its existence" (*ash-Shifá* 274). In the Necessarily Existent, then, there is no distinction between *what* it is and the fact *that* it is; what it is *is* its existence. It is therefore absolute and unconditioned Being. Thus, to say "the Necessarily Existent exists" is equivalent to saying "the Necessarily Existent is necessarily existent"; the subject here is simply identical to the predicate in a way that would not hold for any contingent being.

In this connection, one may recall, as discussed earlier, how Bahá'u'lláh implicitly confirms this Avicennian proposition by restricting "essential existence" to God; because God's essence *is* His existence, His existence is essential to Him. Contingent beings, in contrast, have a merely accidental or incidental existence, as Avicenna explains: "Whatever is necessarily existent of itself has no essence except existence, and . . . whatever is not necessarily existent of itself has existence, therefore, only incidentally" (*Dánishnámih* 409). 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in validation of this point, thus states that "[t]his common existence (of contingent beings) . . . is only one accident among others that enter upon the realities of created things" (*Some Answered Questions* 337–38; *Mufávaḍát* 203). In this sense, the essential is associated with the necessary, and the contingent with the accidental, which here refers to that which is incidental, and not essential or inherent, to a thing. Such contingent beings do not have existence of themselves or essentially, their existence is "accidental" or incidental to them, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Avicenna both explain.

Since the essence of the Necessarily Existent is its very incomposite existence, it follows that it could not have a plurality of essential attributes. Contrary to contingent things such as a human being—which is a composite of the essential attributes of *rationality*

and *animality* by virtue of the intellect and the body, respectively—the essence of the Necessarily Existent could not be a composite of different metaphysical parts or attributes, for then that essence would be something other than the single and incomposite reality of necessary existence. As Avicenna explains (*Dánishnámih* 374), if the Necessarily Existent did have multiple discrete attributes, its essence would be actualized by virtue of those attributes, and that essence would thus be dependent on those parts, and a cause to unite those parts. And this, as we have seen, is impossible for the Necessarily Existent. Its essence, therefore, is simply or non-compositely necessary existence, and whatever attribute is properly ascribed to it is in fact identical to that necessary existence and does not indicate an actual multiplicity within it.

It follows, then, that in the Necessarily Existent there is no distinction or composition of essence and attributes. Its attributes are either identical to its essence, or it transcends attributes altogether, at least in the sense that contingent beings have attributes. Consequently, given that the Necessarily Existent is "necessary in all aspects," it likewise cannot admit of any incidental or non-essential attributes or features. As Avicenna asserts, any incidental feature would require that an external cause had actualized something contingent in the Necessarily Existent, since no incidental feature is essential to the being of its possessor. But we have seen that it is "necessary in every aspect" and fully actual, and thus there can be nothing in it that is actualized by any external cause.

The essential simplicity of the Necessarily Existent thus entails that it is nothing else than the absolute act of being. In it there is no junction of physical parts, no admixture of actuality and potentiality, no combination of discrete attributes, no cohesion of form and matter, no union of essence and existence. It is instead something absolutely one and indivisible, simple and uncomposed. Accordingly, there is nothing more fundamental, more basic, more ultimate to reality than the simple reality that the Necessarily Existent is. It is categorically and essentially unlike any contingent being by virtue of its inherent necessity, simplicity, and absolute oneness, and it is due to its utterly simple essence that it is something truly ultimate. Consequently, the Necessarily Existent is not just one being among beings, for in that case it would merely be a limited and contingent instantiation of existence, superior only in relative degree to other beings. Rather, its simplicity entails that the Necessarily Existent is not something that has or instantiates existence as *beings* do, but instead is Being itself, subsisting of itself, dependent on no other. It is thus wholly unlike all other things and unique—an attribute that will have its full discussion under the coming subsection, "Singleness."

This, then, is how Avicenna deduces the simplicity of the Necessarily Existent, and hence of God. But how does Bahá'u'lláh affirm God's simplicity in addition to His necessity? There are,

indeed, many instances in His writings and those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which divine simplicity is either implicitly—as mentioned above—or explicitly confirmed. In one of His tablets, for example, Bahá'u'lláh firmly asserts that God "in truth, hath, throughout eternity, been one in His Essence, one in His attributes, one in His works" (*Gleanings* 193; *Muntakhbátí* 77). More tellingly, Bahá'u'lláh writes the following in the *Lawḥ-i-Madíniy-i-Tawḥíd* or the Tablet of the City of Divine Unity: "Thou art then witness that God is one in His attributes, and that [multiple] attributes are debarred from entry into the court of His sanctity . . . Recognize, moreover, that the multiplicity of various designations and attributes shall never be joined unto His essence, for His attributes are verily His essence itself" (*Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 4: 329–13, provisional translation).

In these passages, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that God is one and does not have plurality of attributes, for whatever attribute may be properly ascribed to Him is identical to His single essence. Consequently, it seems His intent in these passages is not merely to stress that there is only one God. As we saw with Avicenna, the intent behind emphatically stating that God is one in essence, attributes, and acts seems rather to disallow any notion that there is any multiplicity in God at all. His essence is one; His attributes are one; His acts are one. Therefore, in God there are not multiple attributes and discrete properties; there is only His essential being, which for Bahá'u'lláh is His existence, insofar as His existence, as seen above, is essential to Him. Bahá'u'lláh furthermore suggests, in affirming that God is "one in his works" (*váḥidan fí afʿálihi*) that God does not engage in a multiplicity of actions or works, as contingent beings do, and thus does not admit of the multiplicity of potentially enacting one thing and then actually enacting it, of potentially being one way and actually another. This in accord with Avicenna's position that God enacts, and is identical to, His single and absolute act of existence, and that He is thus exempt from a multiplicity of contingent actions, which would involve the actualization of potentiality in Him.[11] Bahá'u'lláh therefore clearly affirms that God does not have various parts or composition, discrete properties or separate qualities, and confirms that He is one absolutely and categorically. In this way, Bahá'u'lláh affirms the notion of God's simplicity in addition to His necessity.

Furthermore, if each of God's attributes is identical with His essence, as Bahá'u'lláh states, then logically each one of them is identical with, or *convertible* to, any of the others. It follows, then, that for Bahá'u'lláh God has no attributes distinct from His essential and utterly indivisible being, just as for Avicenna. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh's statement that God is "one in His acts" is fully intelligible from the notion of

11 The section "Creation and Cosmology" will explore the question of how the Necessarily Existent performs the creative act according to Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna.

God's being complete actuality, sheer necessary being without any addition of potentiality or contingency or any composition therewith. God is, in other words, pure act insofar as He is necessary existence, the very act of absolute being. If God is truly one, His essence could be no more distinct from His existence than His action could be distinct from either His essence or existence. He is at once necessary existence and the act of being, insofar as His reality as the Necessarily Existent means that His essence is *to be*. Bahá'u'lláh's statements are therefore manifest expressions of the idea of divine simplicity, as is clear after considering an account of Avicenna's explanations for why the Necessarily Existent must be simple. Understanding Avicenna's logical analysis of necessary existence and simplicity thus illuminates the philosophical context and content of Bahá'u'lláh's own statements.

Even if the logical consequences of these passages failed to prove definitively that Bahá'u'lláh affirms God's simplicity, His remarks on this theme in His *Lawḥ-i-Basíṭ al-Ḥaqíqat* or *Tablet on the Simple Reality* would be sufficient to show that He in fact so strongly supports the doctrine of divine simplicity as to take it as a given. Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh stresses in that Tablet that divine simplicity should not be construed as entailing any kind of pantheism or monism, a view in which the distinction between the necessary and the contingent collapses, and God becomes identical with the creation that proceeds from Him. In this too, both He and Avicenna are in perfect concord, as shall be shown.

The context of this Tablet indicates that Bahá'u'lláh was asked about the meaning of the following saying, originating with Plotinus in the *Enneads* (5.2.1): "The Simple Reality is all things," which was affirmed by the prominent early modern Persian philosopher Mullá Ṣadrá. That the Simple Reality (*Basíṭ al-Ḥaqíqat*) is clearly understood to refer to God is assumed throughout the Tablet, and Bahá'u'lláh, incidentally, even refers to God quite explicitly as the Necessarily Existent in this work. Bahá'u'lláh's aim, however, is to explicate Plotinus' original statement and Mullá Ṣadrá's views in a way that precludes any pantheistic reading. In His interpretation, Bahá'u'lláh explicitly affirms God's simplicity and denies that He has any parts or participates in the multiplicity of contingent things. Rather, God is the fullness of existence itself with all its perfection, from Whom the existence of His creatures proceeds, while He Himself remains one and undivided among other things or in Himself. Bahá'u'lláh thus states:

> Thou hast written that an inquirer hath asked for an explanation of the statement of the philosophers, "the Simple Reality is all things." Say: Know that the meaning of "things" in this connection is nothing else but existence and the perfections of existence *qua* existence, while the meaning of "all" is the possessor thereof. This

"all" admits of no division and of no parts. Thus, the Simple Reality, because it is simple in all aspects, is the possessor and totality of all limitless perfections, as it hath been said, "there is no limit to His handiwork."

In the Persian tongue,[12] it may be said that the intent of the philosopher in the above passage in regard to "things" is the perfections of existence insofar as it is existence, and his intent as to "all" is a possessor, that is, the One who is the possessor and totality of all limitless perfections in a simple manner. They have put forth similar statements on the themes of divine simplicity and on the "potency" and "intensity" of existence.[13] Here, the philosopher's intent was not that the Necessarily Existent hath permeated or is divided among limitless entities. Exalted is He above that! Rather, it is as the philosophers have stated: "The Simple Reality is all things, and not any single one of them," and in another place, "The splendors of the Simple Reality can be perceived in all things." This perception is conditioned by the vision of the seer. Insightful eyes behold, in all things, the signs of the One, for in all things are the divine names manifest, while God Himself hath ever been, and shall forever be, sanctified from ascent, descent, and limitation, as well as connection and association [with any other thing]. All other things, in contrast, abide in the sphere of their specific limitations. (*Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:140–41, provisional translation)

In Bahá'u'lláh's interpretation, "the Simple Reality is all things" means that God, the Simple Reality, is the possessor of existence and its perfections insofar as it is absolute existence independent of any of the incidental attributes of being found diversely in contingent entities (such as place, position, quantity, temperature, texture, etc.). For Bahá'u'lláh, the simple and non-composite nature of God is absolute; God is not the basic stuff out of which other things are literally made, and His reality is never a part of, or a substratum to, the contingent order. This would require that God's simplicity become intermixed with limitless complexity, and that He be something basically material and composite which could take part in the material and composite world. This would certainly contradict the absolute reality of God's necessary existence and thus His simplicity, for we have seen how the Necessarily Existent must be wholly actual being with no potentials and no aspects receptive to being or becoming contingent on external causes.

12 Here, Bahá'u'lláh switches from Arabic to Persian, and largely reiterates the same point.

13 This is a reference to Mullá Ṣadrá, for his philosophy made use of the ideas of the relative intensity (*ta<u>sh</u>díd*), as well as the differentiation (*ta<u>sh</u>kík*), of existence as beings proceed from the absolute existence of God.

Indeed, for Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna, God is something fully one and complete in His necessary being, absolutely simple and non-composite, from Whom the existence of other things proceeds, while He Himself remains absolute, simple, and indivisible. And so Avicenna writes in this connection: "Everything is from Him, and He is not like anything which proceeds from Him. He is the source of everything, and is not any one of the things that are posterior to Him" (*ash-Shifá* 283).

'Abdu'l-Bahá, too, elucidates Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the simplicity of God. Reiterating Bahá'u'lláh's assertion that in God there is no plurality of attributes, and that each of His attributes is consequently identical with His essence, He writes that "the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is sanctified above all understanding" (*Some Answered Questions* 168; *Mufávaḍát* 105). Elsewhere, as we saw earlier, He asserts that the Godhead "admits of no division, for division and multiplicity are among the characteristics of created and hence contingent things, and not accidents impinging upon the Necessary Being" (*Some Answered Questions* 127; *Mufávaḍát* 27). The Bahá'í Writings, therefore, confirm Avicenna's notion of the simplicity of God. Logically, what is necessarily existent of itself cannot have parts of any kind, physical or metaphysical, and Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá accordingly affirm God's essential and absolute oneness, in addition to Their explicit references to God as the Necessarily Existent.

However much simplicity may seem to be a rather abstract attribute of God, it is the most fundamental of the attributes that we shall discuss, for two reasons. The first is that it enables one to understand precisely why God as the Necessarily Existent is the absolute terminus of explanation: there is simply nothing more basic and fundamental than He is Himself, and there is thus nothing—even theoretically—upon which He could depend. Because there is no distinction whatsoever between His essence and His attributes, or His essence and His existence, we have no need to ask why He is one way and not another, or whether He could exist or not exist, insofar as He is necessarily existent in Himself. The second reason to devote so much attention to simplicity is that it enables one to deduce additional attributes of God, and also to understand that these seemingly additional attributes are not separate properties but merely represent different ways of considering what the same reality, termed the Necessarily Existent, logically entails. Simplicity, then, enables one to understand how God's attributes could be identical to His essence and to one another, as Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna state, and are not a collection of distinct properties in actuality.

But before we proceed to what Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna have to say about God's attribute of *singleness*, it should be noted that there are some statements from Avicenna on God's simplicity that may not be explicitly

mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh or 'Abdu'l-Bahá. These include Avicenna's deduction that in God there can be no distinction between His essence and His existence—that He just is His being. What Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá do state unequivocally is that God is the Necessarily Existent and absolutely one and simple, there being in Him no multiplicity and division, and that His attributes are one with His essence. The potential absence of an explicit statement on such matters as the identity of God's essence with His existence does not imply, however, that They do not uphold its truth, for it follows logically from what Bahá'u'lláh says of God's necessity, essential existence, and simplicity, His oneness in essence and attributes. As discussed above, to be necessarily existent logically implies being incomposite and simple at the deepest level, that of having a complete unity of essence and existence. It is thus that Bahá'u'lláh uses the term "essential permanence or existence" (*baqáy-i-dhátí*) with reference to God. In sum, if this existence is essential to God and thus an essential attribute, and if God's attributes are identical to His simple essence, it follows that Bahá'u'lláh upholds Avicenna's position that God is the Necessarily Existent whose essence is His existence. If God's essence were not His existence, His existence would not be essential to Him and would therefore proceed from an external cause—making Him a contingent being. Avicenna's argument, therefore, illuminates the importance of the statements on divine simplicity throughout the Bahá'í Writings.

But a question remains. Clearly, there can be no multiplicity within the Necessarily Existent, but has it been shown there is one thing, and one thing *only*, that is necessarily existent of itself? This, of course, is a vital question for the monotheism of Avicenna and Bahá'u'lláh, and it is hence to the attribute of *singleness* that we must now turn.

## Singleness

The *singleness* of the Necessarily Existent means that there is not, and cannot be, more than one necessarily existent being, and that it is unique and completely without like or peer. Avicenna's demonstration that the Necessarily Existent is *single* in this sense follows from its necessity and simplicity. We have seen that the Necessarily Existent is nothing other than its own necessary existence, without parts, various discrete attributes, incidental features, or potentiality of any kind. How then could there be more than one? For Avicenna reasons in chapter twenty-two of the *Dánishnámih*'s "Metaphysics" that if there were more than one being with the attribute of necessary existence—say two—then each one would have to have some additional characteristic that the other did not have. There would have to be something that distinguished one from the other, so they could be considered multiple instantiations of the same nature; otherwise, they would be identical. For example, two human beings are distinguished

from each other by virtue of the fact that each one is capable of evincing a plurality of attributes, qualities, and incidental features. One is standing in position *a*, the other in position *b*; one is six feet tall, the other is five feet; and so on. Although each person has the same human nature, each one represents a separate and distinct instantiation of that nature. Existence, in other words, is imparted to the same human essence in two discrete instances.

But because the Necessarily Existent is absolutely simple and necessary in all aspects, one necessarily existent being would be identical to another in every respect; one would have no essential attribute the other did not itself possess. Each would be immaterial, as was shown in the previous section, so neither could occupy a different position in space. Both would be wholly actual, so one could not have a potential feature the other did not have. And since no necessarily existent being can be a composite of multiple attributes, neither could possess an attribute besides necessary existence the other did not possess. As a result, there can be only one necessarily existent being.

And since, as shown in the previous section, the Necessarily Existent is necessary in every aspect and is sheer actuality with no potentials, it is impossible for it to have any incidental or contingent attribute (such as place, position, quantity, quality, or time) by which it could be distinguished from another necessarily existent being. For such an incidental attribute, in order to arise, would require a cause external to the Necessarily Existent, and the Necessarily Existent would thus have to be a composite of actual and potential existence—existence as it is in itself and existence as caused by another. In this case, it would be a composite being, and any composite being is only contingently existent, in being dependent on parts, as has been shown. Thus, as Avicenna points out in chapter seven of Book One in *ash-Shifá*, there is simply nothing by virtue of which one necessarily existent being could be different from another—each, being only simple existence, would be perfectly indistinguishable and thus identical. Therefore, it is simply incoherent to say there could be more than one necessarily existent entity.

Moreover, since the essence of the Necessarily Existent just is its existence, it follows that same essence could not have more than one instantiation of existence. Since the essence of a contingent being is not its existence, it can be made existent in more than one instance, just as there are many human beings, water molecules, trees, and so forth. But the Necessarily Existent does not have an essence distinct from its own existence, and so the single essence could only have one existence, for it is identical to that existence. On account of these and other reasons, there can only be one necessarily existent being.

Therefore, when Avicenna speaks of the sum of contingent causes needing an external, necessarily existent cause, it could not be objected that there could, even in principle, be a number

of necessarily existent beings sustaining the contingent world. There is but one absolute reality, then, which concurrently sustains the entire contingent structure of being, and which imparts existence to it absolutely and inexhaustibly. It is as though there is but one spring from which all the waters of being flow, or but one root by which all the branches of existence are sustained. The oneness and singleness of the Necessarily Existent is accordingly a logical consequence of its necessity, its simplicity and the identity of its essence and its existence. There is nothing like it, for all other things are contingently existent and have being only derivatively, and thus are much more like one another than they could ever resemble that absolute source of all being. Avicenna, through this means, is able not only to infer the existence of that divine reality transcendent above nature, but also to affirm that such an ultimate reality must be absolutely one and single, unique and matchless. The central claim of all monotheistic faiths is thus rigorously upheld by the rational philosophy of Avicenna—that there is only one God, incomparable, single, and peerless.

This claim, too, is central to the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. There is hardly any work by Him that does not stress, with the unshakable conviction of certitude, the oneness of God and the incomparable, the transcendent nature of His being. Bahá'u'lláh thus affirms, in a representative instance, the singleness of God as a natural concomitant of His divine nature:

> He is, and hath from everlasting been, one and alone, without peer or equal, eternal in the past, eternal in the future, detached from all things, ever-abiding, unchangeable, and self-subsisting. He hath assigned no associate unto Himself in His Kingdom, no counselor to counsel Him, none to compare unto Him, none to rival His glory. To this every atom of the universe beareth witness, and beyond it the inmates of the realms on high, they that occupy the most exalted seats, and whose names are remembered before the Throne of Glory.
>
> Bear thou witness in thine inmost heart unto this testimony which God hath Himself and for Himself pronounced, that there is none other God but Him, that all else besides Him have been created by His behest, have been fashioned by His leave, are subject to His law, are as a thing forgotten when compared to the glorious evidences of His oneness, and are as nothing when brought face to face with the mighty revelations of His unity. (*Gleanings* 192–93; *Muntakhabátí* 75–76)

And what Bahá'u'lláh declares in the poetic strains of the prophet, Avicenna reiterates in the sober tones of the philosopher:

> It has thus been established for you that there is something necessarily existent. Likewise, it has been shown that the Necessarily

> Existent is one. He is thus single; nothing shares with Him His station, and nothing else is necessarily existent. He alone, therefore, is the principle by which the existence of all other things is necessitated, whether directly or through an intermediary cause. And since the existence of all other things proceeds from Him, He is the First. By "first" we do not mean an attribute additional to His necessity, such that the necessity of His existence becomes multiple. Rather, we mean that He is the First in the sense of how all other things stand in relation to Him. (*ash-Shifá* 274)

### Immutability

The simplicity and singleness of the Necessarily Existent distinguishes it as utterly unlike any contingent being and transcendent above the entire order of the contingent realm. And among the attributes and inherent conditions of contingent beings is change and alteration, becoming and perishing. But since the Necessarily Existent has no likeness to contingent beings and contingent attributes, it cannot admit of any alteration, or be receptive to any change.

Avicenna's proof for the immutability of the Necessarily Existent in the *Dánishnámih* is remarkably brief, but since he has previously established its necessity and simplicity, its immutability need only be shown to be logically entailed by those two notions. Since the Necessarily Existent is simply necessary existence and actual being, with no other part existing contingently or potentially, or in any way involving contingency or potentiality, and since any change involves the actualization of a potential or the realization of a contingency through some agent, it follows that there could be no change in the Necessarily Existent. Any such change would require an external cause conditioning some potential aspect or part of the Necessarily Existent. Its complete necessity and simplicity, however, make this strictly impossible. Avicenna writes:

> Whatever admits of change must also admit of having a cause, of being in one condition by virtue of a certain cause, or lacking that condition by virtue of another cause. The being of such a thing is not clear of association with those two causes, and its being would therefore make up a composite conditioned by causes. But we have previously shown that the Necessarily Existent is not a composite being of any kind in association with causes. Therefore, it is not capable of any change. (*Dánishnámih* 376)

That is, in order for the Necessarily Existent to change, there would have to be some aspect or part of its reality that was not necessary in itself but rather contingent upon being actualized by some external cause. Such a being, however, would not be the Necessarily

Existent, which is absolutely simple and not a composite of actual and potential existence. The Necessarily Existent is therefore immutable and unchanging.

The immutability of the Necessarily Existent, and hence of God, is likewise affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states explicitly and decisively:

> For the essence of the Godhead there is no ascent or descent, no entrance or egress. It is sanctified from time and place. It is ever in the apex of sanctity, for change and alteration are impossible for the reality of the Godhead. Change and alteration and motion from one condition to another are incidents particular to contingent and originated phenomena. (*Khiṭábát-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* 2:131–32, provisional translation)

Indeed, change is a fundamental feature of the contingent world, the realm of becoming, and thus is far removed from the Necessarily Existent, which is absolute being without any aspect of becoming. Any change, moreover, is dependent on what already is, and therefore only absolute, immutable being could be the ultimate ground and support of the changing realm of contingent beings. The vital point here is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only asserts the immutable nature of God; He argues for God's immutability by noting that mutability is foreign to God precisely because it is characteristic of contingent beings and thus impossible for that God whom He has affirmed to be necessarily existent. 'Abdu'l-Bahá thus validates the logical method underlying Avicenna's own conclusion. Avicenna's method, in turn, elucidates the rational structure of the Bahá'í theological claim—a trend observed throughout this paper.

Of course, to say that the Necessarily Existent is unchanging is not to imply that it is stagnant, lacking needed activity or dynamism. Rather, it is itself the sheer act of being, and thus of unbounded vitality and life. For there to be any alteration in the Necessarily Existent, therefore, would mean for it to quit its station as the ultimate reality, the ground for all dynamism in the contingent realm. And it is only because it is the unchanging and absolute ground of being that it can sustain the changing realm of contingent becoming. The Necessarily Existent is not stagnant, then, but rather *constant*, and in that constancy any change would constitute no added virtue, but would rather signify a deficiency commensurate with that of the realm which it sustains and supports.

Bahá'u'lláh accordingly proclaims: "Praise be to God, the Eternal that perisheth not, the Everlasting that declineth not, the Self-Subsisting that altereth not (*Al-Báqí bi lá faná', ad-Dá'im bi lá zavál, al-Qá'im bi lá intiqál*)" (*Epistle* 1; *Lawḥ-i-ibn-i-Dhi'b* 1). He is *báqí* and thus abides forever, *bi lá faná'*, without death. He is *dá'im* and thus perpetual and constant, *bi lá zavál*, without decline, corruption, or extinction. He is *qá'im* and thus

subsists dependent on no other, *bi lá intiqál*, without change or alteration.

## Eternality

The Necessarily Existent is thus immutable. However, it is also commonly understood that God is eternal, and this is asserted by Bahá'u'lláh without reservation. Indeed, when we consider the Necessarily Existent, we see that *eternality* is entailed in the very concept of necessary existence. For whatever exists necessarily of itself, and is immutable, must also exist without beginning or end, and is not subject to the passage of time, being beyond any measure of motion and change. The Necessarily Existent never began to exist, and it can never fail to exist. Moreover, there can be no change in the condition of its existence, and time thus has no hold or power over its unchangeable reality. There is no motion for the Necessarily Existent, and so within it there can be no difference between the past, the present, and the future. No alteration or finality awaits it, just as no origination or beginning precedes it.

In it there is rather an everlasting present of the fullness of its existence. The present that belongs to it is one of constancy, permanence, unceasing actuality, and absolute being; it is a present that consists in a timeless and immutable act of existence, a present that has no likeness to the temporal order of the contingent realm. Eternality, then, in a word sums up the necessary existence, the transcendent being, the immutability, the constancy of what is truly God. As such, eternal is one of the various senses of the word *qadím* that Avicenna applies to the Necessarily Existent. In the *Dánish-námih* he explains that the Necessarily Existent alone has the full possession of *qidam*, eternality; for anything that exists through the sustaining power of something beyond itself, even if it had always contingently existed in this manner, is in the realm of origination, of *ḥudúth* (382–83). Accordingly, the Necessarily Existent, dependent on no other, alone has what the sixth-century philosopher Boethius eloquently defined eternality as: "the possession of endless life whole and perfect at a single moment" (Book 5, ch. 6).

As to Bahá'u'lláh, He repeatedly affirms the eternality of God, in one place writing: "One and indivisible, He hath ever subsisted within His station sanctified from all time and place" (*Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:8, provisional translation). To say that the Necessarily Existent is sanctified from place, it being immaterial and thus not extended in three dimensions (since that would require it to be composite), likewise affirms one of Avicenna's theological arguments, but what is important here is Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation that God is sanctified from *zamán*, or time. He is thus eternal, entirely unbound by the temporal-spatial conditions of contingent beings. Though Bahá'u'lláh's references to God's eternality are too numerous to quote adequately here, we may again consider His statement that "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 (*ḥádiṯh*) and the Eternal (*qadím*), the contingent (*mumkin*) and the Absolute (*vájib*)" (*Gleanings* 66; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 340).

## Perfection

In the foregoing pages, we have seen that the Necessarily Existent must be simple, single, immutable, and eternal. By logical extension, then, it is ultimate, incomparable, absolute, unchangeable, everlasting, and the source of all other reality. Such attributes alone and in themselves distinguish it above all other things. Through an understanding of what necessary existence logically entails, therefore, we see that divinity may well be rightly ascribed to the Necessarily Existent. But its divine character will be much more evident once its subsequent attributes, starting with *perfection*, are established.

Avicenna states, in chapter six of Book Eight of *aṯ-Ṯifá's* "Metaphysics," that the Necessarily Existent is perfect, and that perfection follows from its necessary being. Not only is it perfect; its perfection transcends the kind achievable by any contingent being. For Avicenna, perfection (*kamál* or *tamám*) refers to completeness and actuality, as opposed to deficiency and unrealized potentiality. For something to be perfect, then, means that it is complete and free from deficiency in respect to what it is and what is proper to its existence.

A human being, to use Avicenna's example, admits of imperfection, "for many things," he writes, "among the perfections of his existence are deficient in him" (*aṯ-Ṯifá* 283). That is, there are many things requisite for the complete flourishing of a human being that exist only potentially and not actually or necessarily, and their actualization not only requires something outside that person but also may simply fail to occur, in which case he or she would suffer sheer imperfection and deficiency. Such things as soundness of health, prosperity, education, virtue, and love are needed for human life and existence to be complete, or *perfect* in the relevant sense. But a human being depends on external causes for these things or may altogether fail to achieve them, and furthermore may lose them in time. No human being, nor any other contingent being, can be perfect in any essential sense, for in and of themselves human beings do not even have existence, this having been acquired through external causes, and thus they are deficient and imperfect in themselves.

But the Necessarily Existent, being in itself pure existence and fully actual without any potential remaining to be actualized, is *támm al-vujúd*, "complete and perfect in its existence." It needs nothing and depends on nothing in order to enjoy that fullness of being, and there is no higher state of actuality which it might attain. Therefore, in it there can be no lack or deficiency, no unrealized potential or possibility, for that would assume that there is

something proper to it and needed by it that it does not already have by itself and necessarily of itself. Such cannot be said of the Necessarily Existent, which is itself independent, subsistent being, single and without parts. But not only is it perfect in itself; it is, in a certain sense, *fawq at-tamám*, "above perfection." "For not only does He possess His own being," writes Avicenna, "but the existence of every being itself flows from the abundance of His being, belongs to Him, and emanates from Him" (*ash-Shifá* 283).

The Necessarily Existent, therefore, has a transcendental perfection, for by it is the being of all other things created and sustained, and their own contingent perfection realized and made manifest. There can be no limit or deficiency to its being, and thus it is perfect and the source of all perfections in the realm of contingent existence. In addition, insofar as it is immutable, the Necessarily Existent could never become something less than it is, and could thus never suffer, even theoretically, any deficiency or lack. Its perfection, therefore, is inviolable, supreme, and truly necessary, while that of a contingent being is quite naturally only possibly existent, corruptible, and conditioned. *Perfection* in the full sense of the word, then, not only applies to the Necessarily Existent but is also more truly said of it than anything else, for it is, in a meaningful sense, perfection itself.

Such, at least, is the basic sense in which Avicenna regards the Necessarily Existent as perfect, and this concept is explicitly affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. We may recall, in this connection, Bahá'u'lláh's statements in the *Lawḥ-i-Basíṭ al-Ḥaqíqat*, which was discussed in the section on "Simplicity." In that work, Bahá'u'lláh mirrors Avicenna's own phrases, such as "the perfections of being," when the latter writes that the Necessarily Existent is "complete and perfect in His existence, for there is nothing deficient in Him in respect to His being and the perfections of His being." Bahá'u'lláh states:

> Thou hast written that an inquirer hath asked for an explanation of the statement of the philosophers, "the Simple Reality is all things." Say: Know that the meaning of 'things' in this connection is nothing else but existence and the perfections of existence qua existence, while the meaning of 'all' is the possessor thereof. This 'all' admits of no division and of no parts. Thus, the Simple Reality, because it is simple in all aspects, is the possessor and totality of all limitless perfections, as it hath been said, "there is no limit to His handiwork." (*Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 7:140)

Here we see how Bahá'u'lláh uses the phrase "perfections of being," as Avicenna himself does. This shared usage points to the fact that both Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna are explaining a congruent concept of God, a God of absolute and necessary being, who is transcendental perfection, and the indivisible

source of all perfections in His creation. His perfection is His being, and His being His perfection.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, too, affirms the perfection of God and even God's identity with his perfection. In chapter twenty-seven of *Mufávaḍát* or *Some Answered Questions*, He states definitively that "God is pure perfection and the creation is absolute imperfection," God being, in other words, *kamál-i-maḥḍ* or absolute perfection, and the contingent world *nuqṣán-i-ṣirf* or sheer deficiency. Moreover, He remarks there that "the contingent world is the source of deficiencies and God is the source of perfection. The very deficiencies of the contingent world testify to God's perfections."

From these passages, it is evident that the Bahá'í Writings affirm the rational basis of Avicenna's insistence that God, since He is unconditioned being, must also be absolute perfection. The Necessarily Existent is perfect, and it is, in a sense, perfection itself by virtue of its absolute and incorruptible being.

## Goodness

Goodness is no less a divine attribute than perfection, however, and so we must consider whether the Necessarily Existent is good, insofar as the good is linked with the monotheistic conception of God. Yet since the good is such an equivocal term, applied in different ways to different things, an exhaustive treatment of the good in Avicenna's philosophy, and its correspondence with the theology of Bahá'u'lláh, is not possible here. Nonetheless, we can analyze the basic reasoning behind Avicenna's ascription of goodness to the Necessarily Existent, and consider how this further aligns his theological vision with that of the Bahá'í Writings.

Since Avicenna works within the Aristotelian philosophical tradition and accepts its basic postulates (such as the role of actuality and potentiality, form and matter, the four causes, etc.), Aristotle's account of the good is indispensable in illuminating Avicenna's own position. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle, after having rejected the Platonic account, considers how the good is said of many things, and that it thus does not have a single, or univocal, meaning. A man is good, a horse is good, a meal is good, and so on, but the respective goodness of each is not identical in meaning, but of a different character. Nonetheless, there is an analogous relationship among these respective goods. The good, in every case, is what is sought. However, among goods there are those that are desirable in themselves, and those sought rather as a means to other things. So the goodness of a meal is as a means to nourishment and also by virtue of the pleasure it affords. But Aristotle singles out *eudaimonia*—happiness, flourishing, or living well—as that which is desirable in itself for human beings; it is sought as an end and not as a means to other goods, and is thus the highest good of human life. From this point, Aristotle proceeds to analyze what constitutes *eudaimonia*,

and settles on a life lived in accord with reason that evinces fundamental virtues. The human good, therefore, is a manner of life that actualizes or perfects the inherent potentials of human existence.

This is not the place to explicate Aristotle's ethical theory. What is vital for our purposes is his notion that something that is sought may be termed good, especially that which is sought for its own sake, for every living thing has its fundamental end in the flourishing condition of its own being. In addition to this notion, in Avicenna's writing we find affirmed the Neoplatonic idea that evil does not in itself have any positive existence but, rather, it is lack and deficiency—the privation of being and of its perfections, even as blindness is a privation in the eye, as Plotinus explains in the *Enneads* (1.8.9). The good is thus the eminent presence of something, of being and perfection, insofar as the latter are desired for their own sake. With these two notions in mind, we can consider what Avicenna writes in *ash-Shifá* regarding the goodness of the Necessarily Existent:

> The Necessarily Existent, in its essence, is pure good. For the good, in general, is that which all things desire, and that which all things desire is being, or that perfection of being which accords with the manner of a thing's existence. Nothing desires privation as such, but only insofar as the nonexistence of a certain thing is conducive to being and the perfection of being. Thus, being, in fact, is what is sought. Being, therefore, is pure good and absolute perfection. To wit, the good, in general, is that which everything seeks within its own limit, and that by which its existence is made complete. Evil, conversely, has no definite essence. It is rather the privation of a substance, or the privation of a substance's wholeness and integrity. Being, accordingly, is goodness, and the perfection of being is the goodness of being. And that Being which is untouched by privation, neither the privation of substance nor that of something belonging to substance, but which is rather perpetually in actuality—that Being is pure good. A contingent being in its essence is not pure good, because its essence, simply by virtue of itself, does not have existence. Its essence, therefore, is subject to privation, and that which is subject to privation in a certain sense is not clear in every aspect from evil and deficiency. Therefore, absolute good is nothing other than the Necessarily Existent in its essence. (283–84)

Thus, for Avicenna, the Necessarily Existent is pure good in itself, insofar as it is pure being and absolute perfection, which is precisely what is sought as the good by every being, insofar as every being seeks its own flourishing, and for its potentials of life to be actualized in ever greater stages of perfection. Furthermore, the Necessarily

Existent is pure good insofar as in it there is no privation or deficiency, and thus in it there can be no evil, which is the privation of the good.

But the Necessarily Existent is also good in the sense that all other good proceeds from it. It is good, therefore, not only when considered in itself, but also in its effects. Avicenna writes:

> Good is also said of that which bestows the perfections of things and their virtues. Now, it is evident that the Necessarily Existent must be, by its very essence, that which bestows existence onto all things, and that by which the perfection of anything is realized. It is good, therefore, in this aspect as well, even as within it there is no deficiency or lack. (*ash-Shifá* 284)

In Avicenna's view, if good is properly said of being and its perfection, then the Necessarily Existent is supremely good insofar as it, in its essence, is pure being and sheer perfection. Furthermore, it is by the Necessarily Existent that any other thing has existence, and it is by it that the existence of any thing is made complete, such as when an acorn grows into an oak tree, or an infant into an adult. In it there is no evil, no deficiency, no lack, no imperfection. Evil, similarly, does not proceed from it. Evil, instead, is something without any positive existence or essence. It operates as the privation of being and imperfection in a thing, such as when decomposition results in the death of an organic being. But this evil is merely an inevitable feature of anything that exists contingently, for such a being does not, in itself, have existence, and thus is necessarily subject to the privation of being and imperfection.[14]

Regrettably, it is outside the scope of this essay to give the full Avicennian answer to the so-called problem of evil. It is sufficient to describe, in sum, how Avicenna affirms the goodness of God: first, by identifying the good with being and perfection; second, by showing that the Necessarily Existent is absolute being and perfection, and hence pure good; and third, by demonstrating that it is the cause and source of all other being and perfection, and hence only the cause of good, insofar as evil is not a created thing but merely the inevitable privation of existence inherent to any contingently existent being.

Significantly, these notions of the good are readily affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. In *Mufávaḍát* (184) or *Some Answered Questions* (304), 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives His full support to the Neoplatonic account of evil as privation and, after giving a summation and defense of its central premise, concludes:

> Whatsoever God has created, He has created good. Evil consists

14 In this connection, moral as opposed to natural evil may be analyzed as a corruption or imperfection of the will contrary to the objective good and flourishing of human nature. Though there are evil actions, they spring from corruptions or imperfections of human nature and result from having a damaged or disordered character.

> merely in non-existence. For example, death is the absence of life: When man is no longer sustained by the power of life, he dies. Darkness is the absence of light: When light is no more, darkness reigns. Light is a positively existing thing, but darkness has no positive existence; it is merely its absence. Likewise, wealth is a positively existing thing but poverty is merely its absence.
>
> It is thus evident that all evil is mere non-existence. Good has a positive existence; evil is merely its absence.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, here and in the surrounding context of the passage, affirms the Avicennian account of goodness as convertible with being and perfection, and agrees that evil consists merely in its privation. Since evil is an 'adam, an absence or privation of good, it has no positive ontological reality in itself; it consequently is present in the world only as an instance of non-being, deficiency, imperfection, corruption, or decline. It follows, then, that God as the ultimate positive ontological reality and as perfect being is pure good, from Whom only good proceeds: "Whatsoever God has created, He has created good."[15]

In any case, it is implicit in Bahá'u'lláh's presentation of God that God is wholly good. The goodness of God, consisting in His perfect and inexhaustible being, is expressed in personal terms, even as Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly emphasizes the utter transcendence of God. On this latter theme, He writes:

> In truth, no praise or mention of God—how exalted is His majesty, how universal is His grace—can ever befit Him. For the way is barred that leadeth to His unapproachable sanctuary; the path is obstructed that endeth in that inaccessible Secret, that Mystery of mysteries. What is the concourse of the visible set against the sanctum of that invisible Essence? What way can reach Him or road attain to Him? If ever the infinitesimal ant could make mention of Him who is the Aim and Desire of all things, perhaps then the pen could mark down some word relating of the Eternal. And if ever the mote of dust could impart any notion of the blinding splendor of the Sun, if ever the meanest drop could even suggest the full immensity of the ocean, perhaps then human tongue could advance some praise of the Best Beloved of the worlds . . . but thou knowest full well that the invisible Essence is sanctified of, transcendent above, and removed

15 Incidentally, neither Avicenna's nor 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements on evil entail that there is "no such thing" as evil. Although metaphysically evil is non-being and imperfection, it is a feature in the world in the same sense that there *are* such things as blindness, darkness, death, as so on. Though these things are not substances, they can be meaningfully referred to.

> from all in the realm of the visible. (qtd. in Dávúdí 85, provisional translation)

But even as God, according to Bahá'u'lláh, ultimately transcends the knowledge and descriptions of His creation, He nonetheless is the "Aim and Desire of all things" and the "Best Beloved of the worlds," and thus the ultimate object of desire and love—the highest good. For as pure being itself, He is Himself that paradigm of perfection for which all things long, and as the source of all existence, He is that inexhaustible wellspring from which all conceivable good proceeds. Since God is the source of all being and therefore of all good, Bahá'u'lláh stresses His loving kindness, His mercy, and His providence, and it is in these personal terms that He expresses the supreme goodness that is God. He writes, as quoted earlier, that God "rescuing" all things "from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction . . . hath received them into His kingdom of incorruptible glory. Nothing short of His all-encompassing grace, His all-pervading mercy, could have possibly achieved it. How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being?" (*Gleanings* 64; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 338).

But if God's goodness is spoken of in terms of generosity, munificence, mercy and love, then He cannot be a mindless principle, devoid of consciousness. Avicenna, like Bahá'u'lláh, describes the Necessarily Existent as having munificence and supreme generosity; for Avicenna, He is indeed *javvád*, all-bountiful and munificent. This characterizes the goodness of the Necessarily Existent, which consists in how it bestows existence onto all things, as an intelligent and voluntary act, done not for the sake of itself but for the good of created things. It is, furthermore, difficult to conceive something as God that itself is devoid of any knowledge. Therefore, if the Necessarily Existent is to be regarded as divine, it must have intellect and volition, and a goodness consonant therewith. We will thus consider how Avicenna deduces the intellectual nature of the Necessarily Existent, and further correlate his views with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

## Intellect

Though the attribute of simplicity was paramount in showing the ultimate and incomparable nature of the God of Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna, it is in the attribute of intellect and knowledge that the fullness of His divine nature is revealed. For without such a thing as intellect, the Necessarily Existent, however supreme, would seem to amount to some kind of force requisite for the existence of all things, but which itself could not be meaningfully regarded as God. If Avicenna's God were such as this, however, it could not be identical to the omniscient God of Bahá'u'lláh.

To consider Avicenna's Necessarily Existent as void of consciousness, however, would be a grave mistake. The attributes of necessity, simplicity, singleness, immutability, eternality, perfection, and goodness all together point to a reality that is not unknowing and uncomprehending, but which in its very nature is all-knowing and all-encompassing in its comprehension, which is itself pure consciousness and intellect, and which consequently is eminently worthy of the term *divine*.

Avicenna's demonstration of the intellective nature of the Necessarily Existent is brief, but he bases his argument from prior principles in his theory of the faculties of the mind. In chapter six of Book Eight of *ash-Shifá's* "Metaphysics," he points out that the Necessarily Existent is wholly immaterial, and that its existence is disassociated from matter in every respect. We saw the reasons for this in the discussion of the earlier attributes, especially *simplicity*, for if the Necessarily Existent were a corporeal entity, it would be a substance extended in three dimensions. It consequently would be composed of matter and some form to actualize the potentiality of that matter into a realized kind and arrangement. This would characterize it as a contingent entity, however, which is impossible for the Necessarily Existent. A modern person, moreover, could not construe the Necessarily Existent as energy of some kind, for the concept of energy simply refers to the work or activity exhibited in and by physical systems, which are contingent entities. The Necessarily Existent, however, is rather the transcendent cause of all physical systems and contingent entities and thus cannot be construed as something existent within such systems or as descriptive of them.

The Necessarily Existent, therefore, is not a body or any corporeal reality; it has no mass or dimension, location or position, shape or delimitation, nor is it the activity and operation of things exhibiting such attributes. Its being altogether transcends material realities, while being their ultimate cause. If, then, the Necessarily Existent is not matter, could it be mind? According to Avicenna, simply by virtue of transcending matter and all material attributes, it could be nothing else except *'aql-i-maḥḍ*, pure intellect. Although this might not seem immediately intuitive, to recognize the Necessarily Existent's nature as intellect is inevitable once its radical immateriality is considered in juxtaposition with its other essential attributes. Incidentally, that the Necessarily Existent is immaterial in itself has profound implications for one's worldview, for if the Necessarily Existent does exist, then materialism is false; if materialism is false, then explanations of reality, and especially mind, need not, and should not, be confined to what exists in matter.

If, then, the Necessarily Existent is immaterial, how should it be described? Among immaterial things, there are indeed concepts and abstractions that the human mind conceives after considering the universal essence of a thing, such as humanity, as distinct

from its instantiation in particular physical manifestations, such as individual human beings. Such concepts, for Avicenna, would constitute form that is not joined with matter, form which exists not concretely as a particular but in an intellect as a universal. But the Necessarily Existent cannot be a mere intelligible form conceived by a contingent mind, for then it could not be the ultimate cause of all existence. What is more, Avicenna rejects the Platonist notion that abstractions, such as "the Beautiful," "the True," and "the Equal," exist independently of concrete reality or any intellects to conceive of them, and any such thing, consequently, could not be the Necessarily Existent. It follows for Avicenna, then, that the Necessarily Existent, in being wholly immaterial, must be pure intellect. This follows because it could not be a mere *ma'qúl*, an intelligible reality, dependent on or subsisting within an intellect. The Necessarily Existent, therefore, must be a fully independent *'áqil* or agent of intellection and knowledge. It is, in the perfection of its immaterial being, a comprehending reality rather than a comprehended object.

Avicenna's conclusion may be further defended by pointing out that immaterial realities could conceivably include either intelligible forms—universals and abstract objects—or minds and intellects. But things within the former category of immaterial reality seem causally inert: the number 100 does not put a hundred dollars in one's pocket; the idea of blue cannot paint a house; the intelligible form of a horse cannot win a race. The Necessarily Existent, however, is a cause in actuality and supremely so. It, therefore, cannot be some inert, immaterial idea. It must, then, be pure intellect, unbounded by the realm of contingent, material existence.[16]

In addition, the reader may recall from the section on "Simplicity" that the Necessarily Existent is not distinct from its act of being; it is pure actuality. Therefore, this *act* of the Necessarily Existent is one of immaterial being. What, then, is the actuality, the act and action, the mode of existence proper to a wholly immaterial reality? The only immaterial action conceivable is *intellection*, knowing and understanding as opposed to *sensing* and physically perceiving. If intellection is the only act proper to something immaterial, the Necessarily Existent must be pure intellect, insofar as there is nothing material in its being.

Furthermore, the Necessarily Existent is the creator and source of all things, which possesses all the "perfections of being" unitedly in a simple way. The infinite creative power that originates and sustains all contingent existence cannot be reduced to any one immaterial form that does not itself possess, in a higher way of pure unity, all the perfections present in the existence of the fathomlessly vast cosmos. But Divine Intellect conceivably could comprehend all the perfections of being

16 A point familiar to some contemporary theistic philosophers; see Craig.

immaterially, through an act of perfect intellection, and thus be the source of their realization in the contingent order of existence. The Necessarily Existent, therefore, could not be an immaterial reality, like a mathematical abstraction, which in itself is bereft of knowledge and consciousness, but must be pure intellect enacting perfect knowledge and comprehension.

Thus, by virtue of its absolute immateriality, Avicenna regards the Necessarily Existent as *'aql-i-maḥḍ*, pure intellect. At this stage, the justification for Avicenna's characterizing the Necessarily Existent as divine, as truly God, stands ever more revealed. For what, other than God, could the Necessarily Existent be—that supreme intellect which is the self-subsistent cause and creator of all things, that source which is absolutely one, incomparable, unique, eternal, immutable, perfect, and wholly good? One may question the actual existence of this reality, but one cannot question that it deserves the name *God*. For the Necessarily Existent, in being pure intellect, cannot be a mere *what*, but is properly a *who* in the fullest significance of that word. As such, for the sake of brevity, the Necessarily Existent will henceforth be called *God* interchangeably and referred to as *He*. Being immaterial, God, of course, is not a body and thus free of sex and gender; nonetheless, in being intellect, God cannot properly be referred to as an *it*, for that would imply He is void of mind.

But if God is pure intellect, what does He intellect? According to Avicenna, God immediately knows Himself, and is thus conscious of Himself in the fullness of His being. As Avicenna states in chapter twenty-nine of the *Dánishnámih*'s "Metaphysics," what makes something intelligible, as opposed to sensible, is that it be abstracted from matter and its concomitants. When *form* actualizes *matter*, the resulting being exists materially and is perceivable by the senses; it is extended in three dimensions, and can be seen, felt, tasted, smelled, and heard. But when something is apprehended by the intellect, the form is considered separate from a material instantiation, and thus is intelligible, but not sensible. The concept, say, of food is not sensible; it can be thought of as an abstract concept, but it cannot be smelled or tasted. In order, then, for something to be grasped by the intellect, it must be removed from matter and considered as an abstracted form. An intellect, therefore, in being immaterial and removed from matter is immediately known to itself, for there is no impediment, no matter, that could obstruct direct self-apprehension.

Hence, God knows Himself. He is at once knower, *'áqil*, and the object of His knowledge, *ma'qúl*. Of course, God is absolutely simple, so God as the knower and as the known is identical; there is not one aspect of Him that knows and another that is known. In knowing Himself, the intellect that knows is identical to the intellect that is known. Furthermore, since God has no parts, His essential being cannot be distinct from His act of knowledge, so He is also the very

act of self-apprehending intellection; He is knower, known, and knowing all at once and in perfect unity—intellect, intellection, and intelligible. So God, as pure and absolutely simple intellect, is His knowledge just as much as He is His necessary existence, His simplicity, His singleness, His immutability, His perfection, and so forth.

The nature of God's knowledge is explored to great depth in chapter six of *a<u>sh</u>-<u>Sh</u>ifá*'s "Metaphysics," in which Avicenna analyzes the implications of God's knowledge. Since in God there is perfect unity, He must be identical to His act of intellection; He is His knowledge. His knowledge, therefore, must be as absolute, as necessary, as uncaused, and as immutable as He is in Himself. God, then, cannot come to know something, for that would necessitate a change in His essence, which is impossible. Nor could God contemplate a number of separate things in changing sequence, as human beings do, for that would degrade His simplicity. His knowledge, therefore, cannot be like human knowledge insofar as it utterly transcends contingency, mutability, and multiplicity. How, then, could God know anything other than Himself? In one sense, God only knows Himself, but in knowing Himself He knows Himself as the cause of all things, and He thus knows them in an eternal, universal way. In describing God's knowledge and omniscience, Avicenna writes:

> Even as affirming a plurality of acts to the Necessarily Existent is to attribute imperfection to Him, it is likewise improper to ascribe to Him multiple acts of intellection. Rather, the Necessarily Existent intellects all things in a universal fashion. And yet no particular escapes Him: "Not even the weight of an atom, in the heavens or on earth, escapes him"[17] . . . In regard to how this can be, when He apprehends His essence and apprehends Himself as the source of every existent thing, He apprehends the principles of all beings and what proceeds from them; nothing whatsoever exists except insofar as its existence is necessitated by Him through a cause—as we have shown. The confluence of these causes results in the origination of particular things. The First knows these causes and their interrelations; He thus knows the necessity of what results from them, the intervals of time between events, and their recurrences. For it is impossible that He should know the cause and not the necessary effect. He thus comprehends particular things insofar as they are universal. (*a<u>sh</u>-<u>Sh</u>ifá* 288)

Thus, God knows things not by sense perception, but through His perfect intellectual knowledge of Himself as the ultimate cause of all particular things and their necessary interactions, in being the eternal source of their existence. His knowledge of all things, then, is

17 A reference to the Qur'án, 34:3.

universal and eternal, identical to His unchanging knowledge of Himself as the source of all things. He knows things by virtue of being their creator, even if through secondary causes, in a manner very roughly analogous to how a novelist knows, in a universal way, all the particulars of her novel, the actions of the characters, and the necessary effects of those actions in the plot, by virtue of being the ultimate creator of the novel. It is in this way that Avicenna affirms the *omniscience* of God.

This is not the place, however, to explore the many implications of Avicenna's account of divine knowledge and omniscience, especially as God's knowledge relates to particular things. My purpose is rather to show that Avicenna demonstrates that the Necessarily Existent is God in the full sense of divinity, by establishing that the Necessarily Existent is pure intellect and omniscient intelligence. Had Avicenna rejected God's personal[18] and omniscient nature, the Necessarily Existent of his philosophy would not correlate with the God of Bahá'u'lláh. That Avicenna instead affirms this personal and omniscient nature of God yet again indicates the theological harmony that exists between Avicenna's thought and Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

We saw earlier that Bahá'u'lláh validates the Avicennian position that God is simple and non-composite. As such, Bahá'u'lláh explicitly affirms that God's attributes are identical to one another and to His essence—that He is absolute unity. Among the attributes that Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly affirms of God, of course, is His unbounded and all-encompassing knowledge, His complete and universal wisdom. He writes of God in the *Lawḥ-i-Madíniy-i-Tawḥíd*, saying: "He is the Ever-Abiding who perisheth not, from Whose knowledge nothing can escape, Whose grace encompasseth all contingent being, Who knoweth all the secrets of men's hearts and everything that proceeds from them" (*Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 4:314, provisional translation). If knowledge is an attribute of God, and if God's attributes are, as we have seen, identical to His Essence, then His essence is not ontologically distinct from His knowledge or intellection any more than it is different from His perfection, goodness, or immutability. Therefore, if God essentially is His knowledge, it follows under Bahá'u'lláh's teachings that He is immaterial intellect, who alone fully comprehends His own being.

On this theme Bahá'u'lláh states in the same Tablet:

> He is the Eternal from Whom nothing can depart, unto Whom nothing can be joined, Who is, in truth, the Exalted, the Omnipotent, the Supreme. Nothing but His own Essence can acknowledge His oneness, and nothing but His own Being can in truth recognize Him. All that hath been originated and called into existence in this world hath been created only at the word

18 In the sense of having consciousness, knowledge, and intellect, not in the sense of being like a contingent human person.

> of His behest. None other God is there but Him, the Almighty, the Munificent. (*Má'idiy-i-Ásmání* 4:314, provisional translation)

If, according to Bahá'u'lláh, God knows, is known to Himself, and is identical to that attribute of knowledge in perfect oneness and simplicity, it follows that Avicenna's analysis of God is correct, namely, that God is intellect, intelligible, and act of intellection, in absolute unity. Here we see that Bahá'u'lláh not only confirms the accuracy of Avicenna's view; Avicenna's analysis provides a framework by which one can understand the philosophical significance of Bahá'u'lláh's own statements, insofar as Bahá'u'lláh explicitly states that God's attributes are one and identical to His essence. This proposition from Bahá'u'lláh is intelligible if one accepts Avicenna's argument that to be necessarily existent *is* to be immaterial, that to be immaterial *is* to be intellect, and that to be intellect *is* to have knowledge. God thus remains one, His attributes being identical to His essence and to one another.

Furthermore, Avicenna's account of God's knowledge is in accord with, and even makes philosophical sense of, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanation in chapter eighty-two of *Some Answered Questions* that God's knowledge is not dependent on objects of knowledge. That is, 'Abdu'l-Bahá insists that, although God has knowledge, He is not dependent on anything external to Himself in order to have that knowledge. If He were thus dependent, then something within Him, His essential attribute of knowledge, would be contingent on, and in need of, other things, which is impossible. But if God knows, as Avicenna argues, not through a contingent perception of any particular thing, but rather through a direct self-apprehension of Himself as absolute existence and as the universal cause and source of any kind of contingent being whatsoever, who encompasses within Himself and in utter unity all perfections, then 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement is not only intelligible but theologically necessary, given Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on the independent and indivisible nature of God.

Reflecting back on the attribute of *goodness* examined in the previous section, we now see how one can indeed construe God's goodness in personal terms, as Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna both do. This is because God's unchanging and absolute creation of all things, His bestowal of existence onto all things, is effected by Him insofar as He is intellect and self-apprehending consciousness—and thus in knowledge and not unwitting compulsion. Insofar, then, as God is pure good and sheer perfection, the source of all good and all perfections—and insofar as He is intellect—He may well be described as *all-bountiful* and *munificent*. These terms, of course, can only be applied to Him by analogy, for His bounty infinitely transcends the limitations of human generosity. A further discussion of this point, however, leads us necessarily to the attribute of *will*.

## Will

Throughout Bahá'u'lláh's writings, and indeed in each of the Abrahamic religions, there is much mention of God's will. It is indeed by virtue of God's having will that His creative act can be construed as generous, and it is by virtue of will that personal terms of devotion can be applied to Him. How, then, does Avicenna deduce the attribute of will, of volition, from the nature of the Necessarily Existent? In this connection, it must first be noted that for neither Bahá'u'lláh nor Avicenna can God's will be an attribute actually distinct from the others, on account of His simplicity. Therefore, even as God's necessity is His simplicity, which is His immateriality, which is His intellect and knowledge, so is God's will, for Avicenna, identical to His knowledge.

To understand this, one may consider how Avicenna makes clear in the *Dánish̲námih*, specifically chapter thirty-three of its "Metaphysics," that will concerns the manner by which an agent acts. Avicenna immediately distinguishes between acts that are due to nature, due to will, or due to "accident," i.e. incidentally. Regarding acts due merely to nature, one could present the example of the Sun, which illumines the earth by the necessity of its inherent nature; we may well presume that the Sun does not choose to do so, nor does it understand what it is doing, nor does it understand itself as the agent of that effect. The Sun's action is therefore due to nature, and not to will; and yet it is not incidental, for it is necessitated by its essential nature. As to incidental acts, these occur when there is neither intent, nor strict necessity, but some element of chance or an incidental confluence of causes and potentialities, or when persons are compelled to act by an external power or agent, and not according to their own nature or will.

When one acts *knowingly*, however—when one acts with an understanding of the act and oneself as the author of that act, non-accidentally and without compulsion—then such an act, says Avicenna, "is not devoid of will." Avicenna subsequently divides willful or voluntary actions into those done due to reason and knowledge, those done due to supposition (*gumán*), and those due to imagination (*takh̲ayyul*), and it is the first that he will ascribe to God. A voluntary act done in accord with knowledge, Avicenna states, is like that of the physician or geometrician, who applies a treatment or draws a figure according to what they know intellectively.

In regard to God, His act cannot be incidental to Him, for He has no incidental attributes, as we saw in the sections "Simplicity" and "Singleness." He is purely His own essential being, and cannot be affected by anything whatsoever, for what He *is* is necessary and immutable. Therefore, His act cannot be incidental to Him or compelled or conditioned by another. Similarly, His act cannot mechanically be *merely* due to His nature, for that would imply that His act could be separate

or independent from His knowledge, which is impossible because of His simplicity. The act of God as the Necessarily Existent, therefore, must be done in knowledge, for He is Himself pure intellect and comprehends Himself in the fullness of His being. He thus knows that He creates all other realities, and that He ultimately causes and sustains their existence. Likewise, He knows His creative act, and Himself as the author of that act, and moreover acts without external compulsion. He therefore acts willfully and voluntarily. Consequently, since God perfectly knows and fully wills what Avicenna calls the "order of the good" (*niẓám-i-khayr*) that proceeds from Him, the profound and fundamentally unmerited share of existence that all things receive of Him, He is the author of a voluntary action of boundless generosity and bounty. Since He understands this, the bestowal of being from God is a manifestation of His goodness, His bounty, and His providence. To state the matter again, God, in the supremacy of His being, is not compelled by anything outside of Him. The creation of the world, therefore, proceeds according to His volition from the superabundance of His self-subsistent existence.

Nonetheless, Avicenna is explicit in His affirmation that God's will should not be likened to human volition. Human beings have needs and entertain ends because they are not complete and perfect in their existence. They will something because they desire that thing, and the realization of an end is for their own sake. God, on the other hand, has no needs or desires whatsoever. Avicenna writes:

> We find that the Necessarily Existent, Who is perfect being, or Who rather transcends perfection, has no goal in His action, and it is likewise unbefitting of Him that He should know something as being of utility to Him, such that He should desire it. (*Dánishnámih* 394)

In other words, God is complete and perfect self-sufficient existence. He thus desires nothing, and has no goal or aim—in human terms—which He desires to be realized through the creative act. His will, therefore, is not equivalent to desire, for that would imply that there is something in God that could be actuated by a final cause, a purpose external to Him.

Avicenna further writes in the *Dánishnámih*:

> The Divine will is nothing other than God's knowledge of how the order of the existence of all things must be, and His knowledge that their existence is good, though not for His sake, but rather for themselves, for the meaning of "goodness" is the existence of everything as it must be, and the providence of God consists in His knowledge of how things must be, such as the best ordering of the limbs of man and the motion of the heavens. (394–95)

The purpose of this passage is to state that, while in human beings intellect is something distinct from their will for the things they desire, in God there is a complete unity of attributes. Thus, His nature as pure intellect is identical with His being a voluntary agent of His action, which is nothing else but the perfect knowledge He has in His essence of the eternal procession of existence from Him according to the "order of the good." His will is His knowledge, and His knowing act is necessarily voluntary, even as there is nothing outside of Him that could compel Him, just as He has no desire or end He needs to realize that could somehow influence His action. His will, therefore, is as absolute and unconditioned as His knowledge and essential being.

Avicenna's account of Divine will—while persuasive, coherent, and consistent with his account of God's other attributes, especially His *simplicity*—is subtle, even abstruse, and no doubt deserves a more comprehensive treatment of its own. The brief discussion above, however, should suffice to ground an exploration of the theological harmony between Bahá'u'lláh's and Avicenna's accounts of divine will.

First, both Avicenna and Bahá'u'lláh posit that it is proper to speak of God as having will, as demonstrated by Bahá'u'lláh's oft-repeated statement regarding God, "*yaf'alu má yashá*'" (He doeth whatsoever He willeth). Second, Avicenna's account conforms to Bahá'u'lláh's statement, discussed in the section on "Simplicity," that God is one in His essence, His attributes, and His works; that is, Avicenna's account of God's will is in accordance with Bahá'u'lláh's commitment to divine simplicity. Avicenna is able to show how God's attribute of will is really identical to His knowledge, how God's knowledge consists in His intellectual being, which in turn is His very essence as the Necessarily Existent. Consequently, God is one in His attributes and essence. But if God must also be "one in His acts," He cannot will a number of particular things at particular times, as conditioned by changing circumstances. Therefore, as Avicenna says, He wills one primary act eternally—the very act of His self-subsistent and necessary existence—and from this voluntary and intellective act there proceeds, in a universal way as governed by His providence, a single effect: the cascading sequence of beings in the contingent world.[19] This universal and eternal creative act is thus one, and is identical to God's will and His knowledge. We see once again, therefore, how Avicenna's analysis illuminates the rational basis and philosophical content of Bahá'u'lláh's own statements.

Third, Bahá'u'lláh moreover affirms Avicenna's notion that God has no need or desire for things outside Himself, and thus He does not create the world for His own sake, out of *desire*. He creates for the good of the creature, and

19 How the multiple entities of the world proceed from the simple being and unitary act of God shall be examined in the third and last part of this paper, "Creation and Cosmology."

out of His knowledge of the order of the good in the contingent realm. For God, as we have seen, is in Himself perfect being, and thus stands in need of nothing whatsoever. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh appeals to this fact when He says that people ought to accept the religion of God for their own benefit, and not because He has any need of worship. "This is the changeless Faith of God," Bahá'u'lláh says in reference to His own revelation, "eternal in the past, eternal in the future. Let him that seeketh, attain it; and as to him that hath refused to seek it—verily, God is Self-Sufficient, above any need of His creatures" (85–86, 173). Similarly, in the Kitáb-i-Íqán Bahá'u'lláh states: "that ideal King hath, throughout eternity, been in His Essence independent of the comprehension of all beings, and will continue, forever, in His own Being to be exalted above the adoration of every soul" (52–53, 34).

Thus for Bahá'u'lláh, as for Avicenna, God could not have willed the existence of the world through any need on His part, or any desire for something that would have made His existence more sound or complete. God already is perfection, or even above perfection, fawq at-tamám. God's creating is thus done not for Himself but for the sake of His creation and His knowledge of the order of the good that creation constitutes; hence, He is all-bountiful and supremely generous.[20] A fuller treatment, however, of Bahá'u'lláh's and Avicenna's account of creation is to be found in the final part of this paper. Until then, we must consider the divine attribute that will close and complete our discussion of God's attributes.

## Infinitude

That which is infinite must be, by definition, not finite; it has no limitations. The classical monotheistic conception of God often stresses His infinity, His lack of any limit, whether imposed on His being, His knowledge, His power, or His goodness. The idea of each of the *omni-* attributes, whether omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, or omnibenevolence, thus follows from divine infinity. It is thus proper to speak of how the Necessarily Existent, according to Avicenna's positions, must be infinite, and how Bahá'u'lláh likewise supports God's infinitude. But here we should also consider how the infinite is, by extension, identical

20 A reader may here wonder about those instances in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, such as the Short Obligatory Prayer, in which He says that humanity was created to know and love God. Does this contradict Bahá'u'lláh's other statements and imply that God wanted or needed recognition or worship? That the human purpose lies in the knowledge and recognition of God does not entail, in fact, that this recognition benefits Him in any way whatsoever. Rather, the duty of recognizing God is solely for the good of the human being. Since a human being is a rational animal, the highest good of the intellect is to recognize God as the source of all being and as goodness itself. Though God is above worship, the knowledge of Him is the highest good of the beings that He created to be rational.

with the supremely transcendent, for Bahá'u'lláh routinely emphasizes the incomprehensible transcendence of God, how He surpasses every category of contingent existence, and eludes any direct apprehension of His essence.

First, we should reflect on the inevitable conclusion that God, as the Necessarily Existent, submits to no physical limit. This is because He is not material and has no extension in three dimensions. As such, God cannot have any spatial delimitation. He cannot have a certain form, shape, or figure, imposing on Him the limitation of being materially present in a particular location in space. Nor could God, as discussed earlier, be physically extended throughout all material reality, enveloping and penetrating discrete objects. This would imply taking on the accidental qualities and limitations of mutable, contingent realities, changing with them and taking on their multiplicity. As the immaterial, simple, single, and necessarily existent cause of all contingent realities, God cannot be conceived of in this way. God accordingly is *omnipresent* only if "presence" does not signify occupying or filling a point in space as a body does. Rather, since whatever exists has its being from God, there is no place where the supremely creative, ceaselessly sustaining, and boundless ontological power of God is not evident and intimately operative. He thus is everywhere in this sense, but not in the manner of occupying material space and having mass and dimension.[21]

By the same argument, we realize there is no limit to God's power, for all power proceeds from Him, and He derives His power from no other. Indeed, a thing has power, or the ability to act in a certain way, by virtue first of existing and then of existing as the kind of thing it is. Both these facts, however, are contingent upon the creative act of God, His ceaseless bestowal of existence. God therefore has a power in Himself that knows no limitation, whereas the power of contingent beings is limited by their essential contingency and ontological poverty. We should not understand *omnipotence*, however, as meaning "the ability to do anything whatsoever," for that, taken literally, is not an attribute that could be ascribed to the Necessarily Existent. He cannot, for instance, cease to exist or choose to do so, since He *just is* necessary being, nor could He in any way descend into the conditions of the created order; as Bahá'u'lláh says, "the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men" (*Gleanings* 49; *Muntakhabátí* 19). Nor

21 I must here admit that Avicenna, as far as I can tell, does not specifically treat the idea of God's omnipresence in *ash-Shifá* or the *Dánishnámih*. But as it was illustrative of the idea of infinitude and immateriality, I here adapted one of Thomas Aquinas' arguments for God's omnipresence found in the *Summa Theologica* (1:8:1–2), an argument that is fully compatible with (perhaps even influenced by) Avicenna's account of the Necessarily Existent's attributes.

should we expect that God can bring logical impossibilities into being, for an impossibility, in its proper sense, is merely semantic incoherence. As such, God cannot create four-sided triangles or married bachelors. Impossible things simply cannot exist; power is set over the possible, not the impossible, as Avicenna himself notes (McGinnis 187). God, therefore, is infinite in power, when power is understood coherently. He is thus *omnipotent*, as Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly proclaims.

God likewise is infinite in His knowledge. He knows all things by virtue of being their eternal and universal cause as pure intellect; His knowledge is therefore perfect and complete. There consequently is no limit to His knowledge, and He may well be called *omniscient*. Nor is there any limit to His goodness. For if evil is privation of being, He is absolute good in that He is absolute being. And insofar as all possible good proceeds from Him, and insofar as creation is a supremely bountiful act on His part, there is no limit to His goodness, and He is thus *omnibenevolent*.

But God's infinity can be expressed on an even deeper level, beyond omnipresence, omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence; it can be expressed at the level of being itself. A little reflection will show that there can be no limitation to the being of the Necessarily Existent. Perhaps we then should resurrect an admittedly obscure word, and term Him *omniëssent*, "all-being" or "all-existing," under the same paradigm by which one calls Him omnipotent, omniscient, and so forth. The Necessarily Existent has, or rather is, the superabundance of perfect being. This is because, unlike contingent beings, He has no essence distinct from His existence. A contingent being, in contrast, has a particular essence, that which makes it what it is—that which necessarily defines, distinguishes, and limits it.

For example, the powers and functions of a rose bush, stemming from the irreducible fact of its essence, are necessarily limited—they are not those of a dog, a dolphin, or a human being. The rose bush's existence is limited due to the kind of thing it is; it can only exist according to the limitations, and inherent potentials, of what it is. It can only *act* in conformity with the limitations of what it *is*. Consequently, its existence as a rose bush cannot transcend the limitation of its "rose" essence. And since a rose's essence is distinct from its existence, it is astoundingly limited in its being, for it has no existence of itself; its essence requires an external bestowal of existence, and even when that essence is made existent, it is inherently limited in the operations it can perform.

But God has no essence distinct from His necessary existence. Hence, there is in Him no essence that only contingently exists; He therefore, as we have seen, exists of Himself. But more profoundly, His being is not limited, is not circumscribed or delimited, by any essence distinct from His existence. His being then has no limit, no limitation, no condition, no restriction.

Whereas every contingent being is a finite being, the Necessarily Existent is Himself infinite being. As infinite being, He naturally can act as the inexhaustible, the all-bountiful source of the existence of all that is brought forth into being, and all that is sustained in being.

By virtue of the identity of God's essence with His existence, He transcends all categories to which contingent beings belong. This follows because a contingent being, in having an essence that can be considered in isolation from its existence, has an essence that can be defined by the logical terms of *genus* and *differentia*—that is, what general category something belongs to and what distinguishes it within that category. For instance, a triangle belongs to the *genus* of "plane figure," and has the differentia of having three closed sides; a triangle is thus defined as a closed plane figure having three sides. The existence of any particular triangle is limited to and circumscribed by that definition. Being itself, however, does not have a logical genus-differentia definition.[22] Now, even if only one triangle existed in all concrete reality, it could still be defined as belonging to a general kind, and as distinguished by a specific differentia. But since God has no essence distinct from His existence, He has no limit in the sense of a standard definition. He is not even "one of a kind," but rather transcends *kind* and *type* entirely. Avicenna accordingly writes: "It has thus been made clear that the First has no genus, no quiddity, no quality, no quantity, no spatial or temporal location, no equal, no partner, and no contrary—exalted and glorified is He—nor does He have any definition" (*ash-Shifá* 282). That is, the Necessarily Existent has no essence distinct from His existence that could be subject to a definition. This is yet another indication of God's infinitude—His being cannot be contained by kind and species, genus and differentia, nor can it be subject to any reductive analysis.

But insofar as the intellect comprehends a thing by considering its essence abstracted from a particular instance—the concept, say, of *animal* in contrast to any seen or imagined particular animal—the intellect comprehends a thing by separating that thing conceptually from its own particular existence. Likewise, the intellect comprehends an essence by defining it; by regarding it as belonging to a general type, a genus; and by recognizing it as distinguished within that genus by a differentia. But since God has no essence distinct from His particular existence, and accordingly does not belong to any genus or have any differentia, it follows from Avicenna's reasoning that He must uniquely transcend the power of the human intellect to comprehend His reality. Significantly, this is a central aspect of Bahá'u'lláh's theology—that God transcends all other things not only in the order of being, but also in the order of thought and

22 Avicenna's idea that *existence* is an irreducible or basic concept is discussed in the first section of this article.

intellective apprehension. One can come to the recognition of God's existence only indirectly, and not through actual perception or comprehension of His essence. This is well expressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá when He writes in His address to Auguste Forel:

> Now concerning the Essence of Divinity: in truth it is on no account determined by anything apart from its own nature, and can in no wise be comprehended. For whatsoever can be conceived by man is a reality that hath limitations and is not unlimited; it is circumscribed, not all-embracing. It can be comprehended by man, and is controlled by him . . . How then can the contingent conceive the Reality of the absolute?
>
> . . . Thus man cannot grasp the Essence of Divinity, but can, by his reasoning power, by observation, by his intuitive faculties and the revealing power of his faith, believe in God, discover the bounties of His Grace. He becometh certain that though the Divine Essence is unseen of the eye, and the existence of the Deity is intangible, yet conclusive spiritual proofs assert the existence of that unseen Reality. (*Tablet* 15–16; *Min Makátíb Ḥaḍrat 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 259)[23]

God defies comprehension because He transcends the limitations of finite reality. In this spirit, Avicenna writes that "when you recognize Him, He is described, after His individual existence, by the negation of similarities to Him" (*ash-Shifá* 283). That is to say, one can form a conception of God, not by direct comprehension of His transcendent essence, but by affirming that essence in its transcendent nature, by negating from it all the attributes of contingent things, and by recognizing that positive assertions about God are on the order of analogy. On this theme, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that

> no soul has ever fathomed the reality of the Essence of the Divinity so as to be able to intimate, describe, praise, or glorify it . . . Yet we ascribe certain names and attributes to the reality of the Divinity and praise Him for His sight, His hearing, His power, His life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes not to affirm the perfections of

23 Here, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states in Persian that one can believe in God through *qavá'id-i-'aqlíyyih va naẓaríyyih va manṭiqíyyih*, literally through "rational (*'aqlíyyih*), theoretical (*naẓaríyyih*), and logical (*manṭiqíyyih*) principles." This statement indicates 'Abdu'l-Bahá's support, as likewise evidenced by chapter two of *Mufávaḍát* or *Some Answered Questions*, for philosophical arguments for the existence of God, such as Avicenna's. Rational recognition of God is, however, fully complimentary with an experiential and inward apprehension of the presence of the Divine, as indicated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's mention here of "intuitive faculties" (*ṭulú'át-i-fikríyyih*) and the "revealing power of his faith" (*inkis̲háfát-i-vijdáníyyih*).

> God, but to deny that He has any imperfections.
>
> When we observe the contingent world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection, and thus we say that the sanctified Essence of the Divinity is all-knowing. Weakness is imperfection and power is perfection, and thus we say that that sanctified and divine Essence is all-powerful. It is not that we can understand His knowledge, His sight, His hearing, His power, or His life as they are in themselves: This is assuredly beyond our comprehension, for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is sanctified above all understanding. (*Some Answered Questions* 168; *Mufávaḍát* 105)

We see here that 'Abdu'l-Bahá is doing precisely what Avicenna has described: employing the *via negativa* of apophatic theology—recognizing God through negating of Him what He is not, denying that He is at all similar to contingent reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá first recognizes implicitly that God, as absolute being, is necessarily existent and not contingent and dependent. From that premise, He deduces divine attributes through a two-fold process of negation and analogy. He specifically negates from Him those deficiencies of contingent reality, and thus asserts God's perfection. Accordingly, to say God is simple is to assert that He is non-composite; to say He is one and single is to deny Him multiplicity; to say He is immutable is to negate from Him any change or motion; to say He is eternal is to assert that He does not exist in time and is not subject to alteration or decay; to say He is good is to understand that in Him there can be no privation of being such as contingent entities undergo; to say He is pure intellect is to clarify the implications of His immaterial being; lastly, to say He is infinite is the logical conclusion of negating from Him the deficiencies of contingent being, for whatever exists contingently is limited and finite—God must therefore be infinite. Even when one ascribes necessity to Him, one comes to this through the recognition that there must be a reality that is *not* contingent.

Expressing this theme, Bahá'u'lláh Himself writes in the *Lawḥ-i-Basíṭ al-Ḥaqíqat*, with respect to God: "Exalted is He, and again exalted is He, above being incarnate in anything whatsoever, or bound by any limitation, or joined to anything in creation! He hath ever been sanctified from, and transcendent above, all else besides Himself" (*Iqtidárát* 108, provisional translation). No human conception, therefore, could be identical to God's infinite being, however much all things, in having received existence from Him, are signs of that transcendent reality, as Bahá'u'lláh explains in the *Kalimát-i-Firdawsíyyih*: "God is immeasurably exalted above all things. Every created being however revealeth His signs which are but emanations from Him and not His Own Self. All

these signs are reflected and can be seen in the book of existence, and the scrolls that depict the shape and pattern of the universe are indeed a most great book" (*Tablets* 60; *Ishráqát* 116). And in this connection Bahá'u'lláh further relates, again in the *Lawḥ-i-Basíṭ al-Ḥaqíqat*: "God Himself hath ever been, and shall forever be, sanctified from ascent, descent, and limitation, as well as connection and association [with any other thing]. All other things, in contrast, abide in the sphere of their specific limitations" (*Iqtidárát* 106, provisional translation).

In both Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna, consequently, there is a wonder and an awe expressed before the impenetrable being of the Divine, the unfathomable infinitude of God, who is at once recognized as the illimitable source of all things, and as the ultimate, the unconditioned and transcendent reality. This wonder and awe experienced before the Infinite is further expressed in what could be termed the *epithets of praise*, those titles that particularly extol God's exaltation above all praise, His sublimity, His majesty, and His glory, as well as His all-arresting splendor and all-entrancing beauty. And here too is *light* often the chosen metaphor for expressing the fullness of God's perfect being, as set against the *darkness* of privation and deficiency. For Bahá'u'lláh, God's sublime majesty on the one hand—as the supreme reality—and His splendorous beauty on the other—as the object of all desire and perfect goodness and bounty—combine in His name *al-Abhá*, the All-Glorious. Thus, for Bahá'u'lláh, God's majesty, His *jalál*, and His beauty, His *jamál*, are at once contained and exemplified precisely in God's glory—His *bahá*—which Stephen Lambden has perceptively glossed as "radiant 'glory', 'splendour', 'light', 'brilliancy', 'beauty', 'excellence', 'goodliness', 'divine majesty'" (13).

On God's majesty, Bahá'u'lláh exclaims in a supplication: "Thou art He to Whose power and to Whose dominion every tongue hath testified, and Whose majesty and Whose sovereignty every understanding heart hath acknowledged." And as to God's beauty, He implores: "Let the object of mine ardent quest be Thy most resplendent, Thine adorable, and ever-blessed Beauty." But it is alone God's glory, His *bahá*, from which the very title *Bahá'u'lláh*—the Glory of God—proceeds, and the name of the Bahá'í Faith originates. "Lauded be Thy name" thus proclaims Bahá'u'lláh, "O my God and the God of all things, my Glory and the Glory of all things" (*Prayers and Meditations* 248; 178; 59; *Munáját* 166; 121; 45).

Even here, in the *epithets of praise*, Avicenna is in harmony with Bahá'u'lláh, as the clear-eyed philosopher takes up the pen to compose an almost hymn-like conclusion to his analysis of the Divine. The heart is as moved, it seems, as the mind is awed, when it contemplates the Infinite. "There can be," he says, "no higher beauty or glory (*bahá*) than this, that the Divine Essence is sheer intellectual being, absolute good, free from every

manner of deficiency, and one in every aspect. Beauty and absolute glory belong to the Necessarily Existent, who is the source of the beauty of all things and their glory. And His glory consists in this, that He is precisely as He ought to be" (*ash-Shifá* 297).

## Creation and Cosmology

In the preceding parts, we have seen the significant extent to which Bahá'u'lláh affirms Avicenna's theological positions, and likewise how much Avicenna's account of divine attributes accords with the explicit and implicit content of Bahá'u'lláh's statements. For Avicenna as well as Bahá'u'lláh, God is the Necessarily Existent, absolutely one in His attributes and essence, transcendent and metaphysically ultimate. In this part, we will treat yet another aspect of Avicenna's philosophical theology that Bahá'u'lláh affirms—namely, Avicenna's account of how God creates the universe, and his assertion that God's creation has no temporal beginning and is thus, in a sense, co-eternal with Him. We will therefore proceed by first considering Avicenna's notion of a creation that eternally emanates from God. Then, in the following section, we will explore how the writings of both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá affirm the core metaphysical elements of Avicenna's position, and how Avicennian thought, in turn, helps one understand the philosophical content of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements on God's creative act.

## The Avicennian Account of Creation

To understand Avicenna's view on God's creative act we must first recall the substance of his argument for God's existence in Part One of this article. Nowhere in his reasoning did Avicenna claim that there had to be a definite point in the past at which the universe came into being and that, consequently, God's existence must be invoked as a first cause in a temporal sense. Rather, in Avicenna's view, for anything whatsoever to exist, even in this moment, requires that existence emanate or proceed to it from the Necessarily Existent. In other words, any contingent being, in the here and now, is in need of an ultimate cause for its existence, and thus in need of the Necessarily Existent, because the totality of any causal structure, visualized as a chain, depends on a first cause, but in a purely atemporal sense. Even as the first gear of a series of gears imparts motion simultaneously with the movement of the subsequent gears, or even as light proceeds simultaneously with the inherent incandescence of the Sun, so does God impart being to the entire contingent order of reality. God thus creates everything, that is, gives existence to all things, as profoundly now as He ever did in the past or will continue to do in the future.

Accordingly, for Avicenna, at any moment in the contingent world, God is imparting existence to it. He Himself, in being pure existence, is alone possessed of that infinite creative power

to bestow existence. This universe, in contrast, is only contingently existent and depends on God to have any existence whatsoever. In this sense, therefore, God's creative act does not refer exclusively, or even primarily, to any past state of the universe. He creates all things and sustains their being, as an ultimate cause, even in the present. The question that remains, therefore, is whether the universe has a beginning—whether, in other words, God's creation had a beginning, or if it, like Him, is everlasting into the past and future. Avicenna's position, as mentioned several times before, is that there can be no beginning to God's creative act.

The core to one of Avicenna's several arguments on this theme, as found in Book Nine, chapter one of *ash-Shifá*'s "Metaphysics," is that God himself is unchanging and eternal. Since He Himself is immutable, and since His creative act cannot be conditioned by any external stimuli, it follows that God would neither change His will to create nor could something affect His will. Here we may recall that God's will and creative act are no different from His knowledge or intellection; His intellection of things from eternity *is* the cause of their origination, even as the knowledge and apprehension of a book in the author's mind is its cause. But since God knows and wills immutably and eternally, it follows, for Avicenna, that God likewise creates the world immutably and eternally. Consequently, His creative act has no beginning, and the world is accordingly co-eternal with him, even as the rays exist simultaneously with the Sun, though they are dependent on it.

Simply stated, if God at one point were not creating, and then His creative act had a beginning, He Himself would have undergone a change, which is impossible. It follows, then, that He has always created and that the existence of things has always proceeded from Him. Avicenna thus states that, since God is immutable, if He at one point were not creating, even now there would be no creation. Avicenna concludes, therefore, that there could not have been any point during which God was not creating, nor could there be a moment when He commenced creation. Accordingly, Avicenna writes in *ash-Shifá*:

> A sound intellect, which has not been prejudiced, will admit that if the Divine essence has never changed in any respect, then even now nothing would proceed from it, if formally nothing had done so. If nothing was proceeding from it, and subsequently something were to do so, then there would have had to have been some new occurrence in the Divine essence, whether an intention, a volition, a disposition, an ability, a potency, or the like, which had not existed before. (303)

Naturally, it is precisely Avicenna's point that no new occurrence, of any kind whatsoever, is possible within God. He thus has always created.

Avicenna argues further that given the presence of the cause, there must

issue forth a concurrent effect. If, then, the cause is present without that effect, but then later does produce that effect, there would have to be some change either in the cause itself or something external to it which affected its operation. Since, regarding God, there is nothing internal to Him that could change, nor is there some external incident which could affect Him, Avicenna concludes that God's creation can have no beginning—nor, we may add, can it have an end. In other words, given the fact of God's eternal, unchanging will, such an eternally existent cause will necessarily result in an eternally present, concurrent effect that proceeds from it. The term that Avicenna uses for this kind of creation, which entails the absolute imparting of existence, is *fayaḍán* or emanation, insofar as he conceives of contingent beings as eternally emanating from their ultimate source in God, which process might be compared, analogously, to how certain effects emanate from their concurrent causes in the world, such as heat from fire or illumination from the Sun.

The above two arguments for an eternal creation, though carefully put forth in *a<u>sh</u>-<u>Sh</u>ifá*, do not at all exhaust Avicenna's reasoning behind his belief in the eternity of God's creation and, hence, the world. Avicenna puts forth several distinctly premised arguments in defense of the eternity of the cosmos and they are explained in detail by McGinnis (182–202). It is not the object of this article, however, to provide a detailed analysis of all of Avicenna's arguments on this theme, involving as it does abstruse discussions of time. Similarly, it is beyond the aim of this paper to defend Avicenna's view against any possible objections. What is vital here is that Avicenna's basic logic in the argument above, as we will see in the next section, is routinely validated in Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings. In the meantime, then, we will consider another important aspect of Avicenna's views on creation in addressing the question of just how the world emanates from God.

To frame this question, we may first consider something of a dilemma. It has been stressed throughout this paper that God, as understood by Avicenna and Bahá'u'lláh, is fundamentally different from the contingent world which depends on Him. Whereas He is necessarily existent, immutable, immaterial, single, and simple, the world is contingent, mutable, material, and is, furthermore, subject both to multiplicity and to composition. How, then, do the many created things proceed from the absolute oneness of God? Avicenna's answer to this question, as a development of a core idea in Neoplatonic philosophy, is that "from the one, insofar as it is one, only one can proceed" (*a<u>sh</u>-<u>Sh</u>ifá* 330). That is to say, since God is one and simple, multiple things cannot directly emanate from Him. Avicenna argues that if different things, such as form and matter, were to proceed from God, insofar as they differ in kind, they would have to proceed from different aspects in Him; there are, however, no different aspects existing in God, Who is absolute unity

and simplicity. It thus follows that only one thing can directly proceed from Him, a single effect of the absolute act of His existence, something that is not a physical composite of form and matter (*ash-Shifá* 328). For Avicenna, therefore, what immediately proceeds from God is only one being, a *fayḍ*, an effluence or emanation which is immaterial like Him and accordingly an intellect, for the same reasons outlined in the earlier section on this very subject. This intellect, then, is the first being or created entity to emanate from God, *first* not in the sense of time but of ontological rank. Given that it is an intellect and the first created entity, it is naturally known as the First Intellect, or '*aql-i-avval* in Persian.

Though the First Intellect is one and immaterial, it is nonetheless not absolute unity, as God is Himself. As Avicenna explains in the thirty-eighth chapter of the "Metaphysics" in the *Dánishnámih*, the First Intellect has two aspects. In one aspect, it understands itself as a contingent entity, insofar as, in itself, it need not exist and is thus only contingently existent. In another aspect, however, it is necessarily existent insofar as it is directly caused by or emanated from God. As a result, there is a kind of multiplicity in the First Intellect, for it is admittedly a composite of essence and existence, which God, as the Necessarily Existent in Himself, is not, as we saw in the section on "Simplicity." On this theme, and of the concomitant distinction between essence and existence, Avicenna writes:

> Whatever is necessarily existent of itself has no essence except existence, and . . . whatever is not necessarily existent of itself has existence, therefore, only incidentally. But since this existence is incidental to something, there must be an essence to which this existence is incidental, such that an entity is contingently existent in respect to its essence, necessarily existent in respect to its cause, and unable to exist without that cause. Therefore, since the contingently existent receives existence from the Necessarily Existent, it is one thing insofar as it has existence from its cause, another thing in respect to itself . . . if this thing should be an intellect, it possesses one aspect insofar as it knows God as the First Cause, another aspect insofar as it knows itself. (*Dánishnámih* 409–10)

In other words, an intellect can comprehend its own essence and therefore its contingency, but it can also contemplate its existence and thus its derivative or conferred necessity as caused by another. Such an intellect, therefore, has some multiplicity; even though it is not a composite of matter and form, it is a composite of essence and existence. As Avicenna explains in the rest of the chapter, it *is* true that only one thing proceeds from God, who is absolute oneness: the First Intellect. It is subsequently from the First Intellect, however, that the rest of creation proceeds, in increasing orders of contingency and

multiplicity, insofar as the contingency and multiplicity begins in the one entity of the First Intellect, and then compounds in the beings that emanate consecutively therefrom.

The multiplicity of the contingent world, in this case, does not emanate directly from the unity and simplicity of God. Instead, Avicenna envisions a hierarchy of being, in which different levels of being are established as the procession of existence descends from God. Consequently, material creation, which is subject to multiplicity, emanates from God only through a series of intermediaries, of which the First Intellect is the prime member. God is thus the ultimate ontological cause of the world but not its *proximate*, or immediate, efficient cause. Finally terminating in the material world, the levels of existence that descend further from the First Intellect become progressively more contingent, deficient, and imperfect, insofar as they have more privation of existence and being, while those closer in existential rank to the First Intellect and thus to God are more perfect and enduring, even immaterial.

In this connection, one could suggest an analogy in which God Himself is thought of as a pure white, single, immutable light source, while the First Intellect is the emanated light that proceeds from Him; the lower levels of existence with all their multiplicity, meanwhile, are the refracted, polychromatic rays produced by the "prism" of increasing contingency and privation. Such, then, is the essence of Avicenna's emanative scheme of eternal creation: God, Himself pure unity and absolute being, enjoys such a superfluity of existence that it emanates or "overflows" from Him as an eternal, constant act of creative grace and providence; this *fayḍ* or emanation then proceeds through the First Intellect ultimately to create the lower realms in their multiplicity, diversity, and materiality.[24]

Before we consider the harmonies between his cosmology and that of Bahá'u'lláh, however, I will note that Avicenna's view, in its metaphysical aspects, should be of interest for any theist, insofar as he elegantly reconciles the dilemma of how a realm of temporal existence and multiplicity could ever be created by or proceed from an ultimate reality that is eternal and absolutely one: through an intermediary principle that reflects something of the nature of both realties. Nevertheless, Avicenna did correlate the considerations above with since-outdated theories on the scheme of the physical universe. Namely, Avicenna, not having the benefit of early modern telescope technology, upheld the geocentric theory of Aristotle, who thought that the Sun, Moon, and planets revolved around the earth, each in

24 Accordingly, the single act of God, which is identical to Him, is His act of self-subsistent existence, as described in the section "Simplicity." However, through this same act of existence there eternally emanates a voluntary effect: the procession of the First Intellect and then, through it, the sequence of beings in the contingent realm.

its own "sphere" (*falak* in Persian and Arabic), while an outermost sphere compassed the cosmic frame. Accordingly, Avicenna thought that nine additional intellects proceeded after the First Intellect, each one producing a particular sphere, until the emanation of the last, sublunar sphere. The intellect associated with this lowest sphere, the *'Aql-i-Fá'il* or Active Intellect, then would produce all the multiplicity of the earthly realm and, most importantly, would actualize the many forms or essences of things in the potentiality of matter (McGinnis 205).

Given the explicit rejection of geocentrism in the Bahá'í Writings, ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 28; *Mufávaḍát* 18–19) in agreement with modern astronomy, as well as Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation that "every fixed star hath its own planets" (*Gleanings* 163; *Muntakhabátí* 65), it is of course apparent that the astronomical content of Avicenna's positions is not confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh. Nonetheless, the purely metaphysical content of Avicenna's view remains pertinent—namely, the core proposition that God creates the contingent world through an eternal emanation of existence from Himself through the intermediary of the First Intellect. Accordingly, we will consider in the last and final section of this paper the Avicennian principles confirmed in Bahá'u'lláh's own cosmology.

## Bahá'u'lláh's Account of Creation

The two essential elements of Avicenna's view on creation, as seen above, are first that God's creative act is eternal and that therefore the world is co-eternal with Him while being ceaselessly dependent upon Him, and second that God creates via an emanation of existence in a hierarchy of being through some intermediary principle. Both of these propositions find explicit support not only in Bahá'u'lláh's writings but also repeatedly in those of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. First, with regard to the eternity of the world, Bahá'u'lláh explains:

> Know assuredly that God's creation hath existed from eternity, and will continue to exist forever. Its beginning hath had no beginning, and its end knoweth no end. His name, the Creator, presupposeth a creation, even as His title, the Lord of Men, must involve the existence of a servant.
>
> As to those sayings, attributed to the Prophets of old, such as, "In the beginning was God; there was no creature to know Him," and "The Lord was alone; with no one to adore Him," the meaning of these and similar sayings is clear and evident, and should at no time be misapprehended. To this same truth bear witness these words which He hath revealed: "God was alone; there was none else besides Him. He will always remain what

> He hath ever been." Every discerning eye will readily perceive that the Lord is now manifest, yet there is none to recognize His glory. By this is meant that the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of anyone besides Him. Whatsoever in the contingent world can either be expressed or apprehended, can never transgress the limits which, by its inherent nature, have been imposed upon it (*ḥudúdát-i-imkáníyyih*). God, alone, transcendeth such limitations. (*Gleanings* 150–51; *Iqtidárát* 72–73)

In the first sentence of the above paragraph, Bahá'u'lláh unequivocally asserts the perpetual duration of God's creation, and subsequently connects God's nature as Lord and Creator with the notion that an everlasting and beginningless creation is a necessary effect of His own unchanging will and causal status; this logic is unmistakably similar in character to Avicenna's arguments for the eternity of the world from the immutability of God.

The second sentence, however, is paradoxical at first blush: how can the cosmos have a beginningless beginning or an endless end? The apparent ambiguity of Bahá'u'lláh's statement may be resolved if we consider the precise wording of the original Persian, as well as the implications of the preceding sentence. The Persian text literally states that there is no *bidáyat* or beginning to creation's *avval*, its start or firstness, and no *niháyat* or termination of its *ákẖir*, its end or extremity. Given that Bahá'u'lláh states this immediately after confirming the limitless duration of the world into the past and future, this sentence may be understood as asserting that there is no *temporal* beginning to the world's generation, just as there is no *temporal* end to its progression or continuation. Hence, it is possible to render that sentence as follows: "There is neither a beginning to the world's generation nor any end to its progression."

The important point, however, is that creation does have a "start" or *avval* in terms of its being absolutely dependent on God, who remains its concurrent cause; God is prior to the totality of the world or His creation in terms of ontological rank, even if not in time (recall the discussion in the first two sections of how a cause can be concurrent with its effect, and thus "prior" to it in essence, though not in time). In this connection, Bahá'u'lláh affirms the essential dependence of the world on God, and thus its atemporal posteriority to Him, when He states in another place that "there can be no doubt whatever that if for one moment the tide of His mercy and grace (*fayḍ*) were to be withheld from the world, it would completely perish" (*Gleanings* 68; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 342). Here, it is significant that Bahá'u'lláh uses the term *fayḍ*, or literally emanation—as we saw with Avicenna—such that He states that without the emanation (of grace or existence) from God, the world would at once be rendered *ma'dúm*, nonexistent.

With an appreciation of this point—the unceasing dependence of the created world on God—we can understand Bahá'u'lláh's statement in the large excerpt quoted above that while God is existent now, His creation is void of existence or *mafqúd*. Bahá'u'lláh immediately qualifies this statement by clarifying that God transcends all the *ḥudúdát-i-imkáníyyih*, literally all the limitations of contingency. Since the world exists only contingently and dependently, in relation to God, who exists necessarily and independently, it is as though it were nonexistent; God is alone, in the specific sense that He is without peer or match in the manner of His being and existence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterates this position when He confirms that "although the contingent world exists, in relation to the existence of God it is non-existence and nothingness" (*Some Answered Questions* 324; *Mufávaḍát* 196).

From the above points, we may conclude that Bahá'u'lláh affirms Avicenna's metaphysical position that the created world is beginningless and perpetual, but that it is always dependent, for its existence, on God, Who is its ultimate, unchanging and eternal cause. How, then, does Bahá'u'lláh additionally confirm the idea of creation as emanation? In this regard, the *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat* is relevant, for in that work Bahá'u'lláh not only affirms the co-eternity of the world with God, Who ceaselessly sustains it, but He also establishes the Word of God or Logos as an intermediary reality that emanates from the Godhead and creates the physical world. First, as to the world's co-eternity, Bahá'u'lláh is careful to note that, though the world may be without beginning or end in time, it nonetheless is "preceded" by the causal power of God. He explains:

> As regards thine assertions about the beginning of creation, this is a matter on which conceptions vary by reason of the divergences in men's thoughts and opinions. Wert thou to assert that it hath ever existed and shall continue to exist, it would be true; or wert thou to affirm the same concept as is mentioned in the sacred Scriptures, no doubt would there be about it, for it hath been revealed by God, the Lord of the worlds . . . God was, and His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning, apart from its being preceded by a Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness . . . (*Tablets* 140; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ ba'd az Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 82)

Given the context of Bahá'u'lláh's other statements, it is clear that in the above passage He affirms that the world is eternal; He nonetheless endorses the creation account in the scriptures because He supports the underlying truth they uphold, namely, that the world *is* created by God and is *not* eternal in the sense of transcending the bounds of mutability and being necessarily existent in itself and immutable, for it is fundamentally contingent and could

not exist, even for a moment, without the sustaining providence of God, as Avicenna likewise states. Accordingly, for Bahá'u'lláh, one can support the eternity of creation while also affirming the central content of the Biblical and Qur'ánic accounts.

With this understanding, the previously quoted statement from Bahá'u'lláh is altogether intelligible: "God was, and His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning, apart from its being preceded by a Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness . . .". Creation has ever resided "beneath His shelter"—that is, it is has always depended on God—"from the beginning that hath no beginning," which is to say forever into the past. The world, however, is preceded by the essential priority or "firstness" of God as its concurrent cause. This essential priority or firstness thus is not recognized as a *temporal* priority or firstness. In other words, Bahá'u'lláh here affirms Avicenna's view that God precedes His creation as its cause but not in terms of being prior in a sequence of time, as though there was some definite point in the past "before" which there was no creation proceeding from God. Accordingly, Bahá'u'lláh may be understood as saying that the world is "preceded by [an essential] firstness which cannot be regarded as [a temporal] firstness." Avicenna's metaphysical analysis of concurrent causation and essential priority, as discussed in the first section, thus helps make intelligible what Bahá'u'lláh was here expressing to His immediate audience, in this case the erudite Bahá'í philosopher Nabíl-i-Akbar, who would have been well familiar with Avicenna's thought.

Shortly after this point in the *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat*, Bahá'u'lláh describes the Word of God as the instrumental cause of the cosmos. He states that this all-compelling "Word of God" is "the cause of the entire creation," while all else besides it is a created thing and an effect. The Word or "Command of God," He states furthermore, has never been severed or *munqaṭi'* from the world, which recalls His statement, quoted above, that all created things would perish were the emanation of God's grace to be withheld for even one moment. The Word of God may thus be identified as that emanation, or as the chief medium of the gracious emanation of being from God. Significantly, Bahá'u'lláh confirms this reading in the *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat* when He says this Word is *al-fayḍ al-a'ẓam*, literally the supreme emanation, and the *'illat al-fuyúḍát,* the cause of the [subsequent] emanations.

Bahá'u'lláh then concludes this section of the tablet by stating that this Word is "the Cause which hath preceded the contingent world—a world which is adorned with the splendors of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times" (*Tablets* 141; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ ba'd az Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 83). This last statement is particularly pertinent. The world is literally described as being adorned or *muzayyan* with *aṭ-ṭiráz al-qadím*, the vesture of eternity, and yet it is at

all times regenerated (*tajaddud*) and originated or created (*ḥudúth*). This is possible because the Word precedes the world in being its concurrent cause, and it is thus that which continuously sustains and generates it, thus allowing it to be beginningless and perpetual.

In sum, Bahá'u'lláh represents this Word as having emanated from God; it is "the supreme emanation," and it is moreover the cause of subsequent "emanations," which can be read as the levels of contingent reality that compose the rest of creation. It is thus apparent that Bahá'u'lláh is describing a creation, even as Avicenna did, that eternally emanates from God through an intermediary principle, which He calls the Word. The Word, then, is stunningly similar to the First Intellect described by Avicenna and, in any case, it is identical in function and operation as the first emanation from God which in turn emanates the subsequent levels of existence.

Let it be noted here that there is a general consensus among Bahá'í scholars that the intermediary principle which Bahá'u'lláh calls the Word of God in the *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat* is the same reality expressed by various terms throughout the Bahá'í writings, including the "Holy Spirit" (*Rúḥu'l-Qudus*) and the "Primal Will" (*Mashíyyat-i-Avvalíyyih*), as well as the "Realm of Revelation" or of "Divine Command" (*'Álam-i-Amr*).[25] This is apparent when Bahá'u'lláh describes the Primal Will as the instrumental or mediating cause of the creation of the world in the *Lawḥ-i-Kullu'ṭ-Ṭa'ám*, a function that belongs to the Word of God in the *Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat*, for in the former He states that it is by means of the Primal Will that God created the heavens and earth. Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the Word and the Holy Spirit as synonyms in chapter thirty-eight of *Mufávaḍát* or *Some Answered Questions*.

In this connection, Bahá'u'lláh's account of emanation, the intermediary principle, and the co-eternity of creation—affirming as it does the philosophical arguments of Avicenna—is itself reaffirmed and clarified in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings and recorded statements. In one instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only speaks of the emanation of the world from God, but also explicitly identifies the Word of God or Primal Will with the First Intellect, while perhaps even alluding to Avicenna himself. 'Abdu'l-Bahá thus asserts: "The procession (*qíyám*) of creation from God is a procession through emanation. That is, creation emanates from God" (*Some Answered Questions* 234; *Mufávaḍát* 144), where *qíyám* can signify dependence and subsistence, such that the creation depends upon God by being subsistent through His emanation of existence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues by stating:

> It follows that all things have emanated from God; that is, it is

25 Keven Brown, "Brief Discussion of the Primal Will in the Bahá'í Writings"; Riaz Ghadimi, 662; and 'Ali-Murad Dávúdí, *Ulúhíyyat va Maẓharíyyat*, "Station of Unity."

> through God that all things have been realized, and through Him that the contingent world has come to exist. The first thing to emanate from God is that universal reality which the ancient philosophers termed the "First Intellect" and which the people of Bahá call the "Primal Will." (*Some Answered Questions* 235; *Muf̣ávaḍát* 144)

'Abdu'l-Bahá then stresses the eternal nature of the First Intellect or Primal Will, as well as the concomitant co-eternity, and ceaseless dependence, of the creation upon that intermediary principle, and ultimately God.

> This emanation, with respect to its action in the world of God, is not limited by either time or place and has neither beginning nor end, for in relation to God the beginning and the end are one and the same. The pre-existence of God is both essential and temporal, while the origination of the contingent world is essential but not temporal. (*Some Answered Questions* 235; *Muf̣ávaḍát* 145)

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the origination of the world is not temporal but essential, He evidently means to confirm that the world *is* created by and dependent on God; its dependence and contingency are essential to its nature. It is therefore, in its very essence, originated and not self-subsistent; in other words, it is a contingent entity. Nevertheless, this origination is not one defined in reference to time; there has always been an originated creation and contingent world. The world, then, is contingent upon the ceaseless emanation of existence from God through the First Intellect or Primal Will. Just as Avicenna recognizes that the First Intellect is in itself a contingent being and not equal to the Necessarily Existent, 'Abdu'l-Bahá likewise clarifies that, in itself, the First Intellect does not share the absolute ontological priority or precedence of the Godhead: "Though the First Intellect is without beginning, this does not mean that it shares in the pre-existence of God (*qidam*), for in relation to the existence of God the existence of that universal Reality is mere nothingness" (*Some Answered Questions* 235–36; *Muf̣ávaḍát* 145). Here, the word referring to the "pre-existence" of God is *qidam*, which, as explored in the two opening sections, refers to the ontological priority of a cause in relation to a concurrent effect to which it bestows existence. Although the First Intellect is eternal, it is eternally dependent on the immediate effusion of being from the Godhead, and thus subordinate to it.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's explicit identification of the Primal Will, a core feature of Bahá'í theology and cosmology, with the First Intellect mentioned and argued for by Avicenna, seems to me to demonstrate that the intermediary principle of creation, which Bahá'u'lláh variously calls the Word of God, the Most Exalted Word (*Kalimiy-i-'Ulyá*), and the Primal Will, is in essence

identical to Avicenna's First Intellect. Consequently, Bahá'u'lláh affirms the core metaphysical content of Avicenna's cosmology, which we can break down into the following seven propositions that they share: (1) God, in being immutable, eternal, and absolute, eternally creates the world; (2) the world, accordingly, has no beginning or end in time; (3) the world nonetheless is ceaselessly dependent on God for its existence, insofar as it is a contingent entity; (4) God creates through the emanation of existence from Himself; (5) the physical world is not an immediate emanation from God; (6) an intermediary reality, whether called the Word, the Primal Will, or the First Intellect, is the first entity to emanate from the godhead, *first* in the atemporal sense of ontological precedence (as the motion of the hand *precedes* the motion of the key it holds, not in time but in its causal operation); and (7) the First Intellect, which is the immediate emanation from the Godhead, in turn emanates the existence of all other things. That Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna should share the seven propositions listed above is no superficial testament to the fact that Bahá'u'lláh largely validates the central tenets of Avicennian metaphysical theology, and that Avicennian thought helps elucidate the philosophical content of the Bahá'í Writings. This being established, there remains only one additional point to address before we conclude this section.

At the end of the preceding section, we saw that Avicenna holds that from the First Intellect nine other intellects emanate in succession, the last of which, the *'Aql-i-Fá'il* or Active Intellect, generates and sustains the existence of the material realm. In the Bahá'í system, there is no mention of such subsequent intellects. Instead, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly state that the First Intellect or Primal Will is in fact responsible for the creation of the physical world. It may follow, then, that for Bahá'u'lláh the First Intellect additionally assumes the operations performed by the Active Intellect under Avicenna's view. In this connection, Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá have a cosmology that divides existence into three realms. The first is the Realm of God or *'Álam-i-Ḥaqq*, which is the level of reality strictly confined to the Necessarily Existent, who is perfect, immutable, and absolute. There is then the Realm of Command or the Realm of the Kingdom, *'Álam-i-Amr* and *'Álam-i-Malakút* respectively, which is the station of the First Intellect, Primal Will, or Holy Spirit. Lastly, there is the Realm of Creation or *'Álam-i-Khalq*, which is the sum of contingent reality created and sustained by God through the intermediary of the First Intellect. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this cosmological picture thus:

> The Prophets . . . hold that there are the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of creation: three things. The first emanation is the outpouring grace of the Kingdom, which has emanated from God and has appeared in the realities of all things, even

> as the rays emanating from the sun are reflected in all things. (*Some Answered Questions* 341; *Mufávaḍát* 205–6)

For Avicenna, what the Bahá'í Writings call the Realm of the Kingdom would comprise at least ten intellects along with the celestial spheres with which they are associated, while the Earth, which is the realm beneath the last, lunar sphere, is the physical world. Since Bahá'u'lláh rejects any geocentric astronomy, He naturally does not affirm the idea that there are multiple intellects emanating in succession as associated with the heavenly spheres. I suggest, therefore, that the Realm of the Kingdom, *'Álam-i-Malakút* or *'Álam-i-Amr*, in the Bahá'í system, may well be reduced to one universal reality, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls it, the First Intellect and Primal Will. In sum, for Bahá'u'lláh the First Intellect fulfills the direct creative activity that the Active Intellect performs in Avicenna's cosmology. Aside from this minor point of difference, however, the metaphysical or theological content of Bahá'u'lláh's and Avicenna's cosmologies are markedly similar, as is evident in the seven shared propositions listed above.

This commonality is even more apparent when we consider Avicenna's account of prophethood. For Avicenna, the Active Intellect not only manifests the forms or essences of things in the material world, but it also actualizes universal concepts in human intellects. Though it is beyond the scope of this article to explain the concomitant aspects of Avicenna's theory of psychology and abstraction, it is sufficient to note that, for Avicenna, a prophet is one who is naturally disposed, by the particular constitution and character of his soul, to receive more fully than other people the intellectual illumination of the Active Intellect, and who is thus able to understand the nature of things in a flash of inspired intuition, and not merely through unaided sense perception and induction (McGinnis 147–48).

Similarly, in the Bahá'í system, a prophet or Manifestation of God is one whose human soul is uniquely associated with the First Intellect, Primal Will, or Holy Spirit so as to "manifest" the attributes of Divinity, including inherent knowledge of the natures and realities of things, in the earthly realm. Although Avicenna's objective is to provide a rational explanation of Islamic prophethood consonant with his metaphysics and theology, his approach has resonances with the Bahá'í concept of the Manifestation of God, insofar as he stresses the natural superiority of the prophet to other human beings, and his resulting special association with the Active Intellect; this replaces a more conventional idea of popular faith, contrary to Bahá'í thought, that the prophet is no different than other men, aside from a rather arbitrary imposition of God's directives into his consciousness. This is yet another evidence, therefore, that for Bahá'u'lláh the First Intellect in fact encompasses the range of activity Avicenna divided among the First Intellect or Emanation,

subsequent intellects, and the Active Intellect. It remains for later scholarship to correlate as well as differentiate further the more abstruse and minute correlations of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and Avicenna's philosophy.

## Conclusion

In the foregoing sections, we have seen how the theology of Bahá'u'lláh validates core features of the metaphysical philosophy of Avicenna—that God exists as the one ultimate and unconditioned reality, necessarily existent, simple, single, immutable, eternal, perfect, and wholly good; omniscient in intellect and free in will; unlimited in His being and thus truly infinite and transcendent, as contrasted with the constrained nature of contingently existent beings. Bahá'u'lláh affirms, moreover, as Avicenna argues, that these attributes are each indistinguishable in reality from the indivisible essence of God, which is necessary existence, insofar as to be necessarily existent just is to be simple, indivisible, immutable, perfect, wholly good, and infinite. We have seen, furthermore, that Bahá'u'lláh confirms Avicenna's view that the world is eternal, though ceaselessly dependent on God, from whom the existence of all things emanates through the intermediary of the First Intellect or Primal Will. The metaphysical harmony between Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna is consequently not restricted to certain superficial or incidental features of their thought. The agreement between them is in fact fundamental and wide-ranging, and indicates a shared interpretation of reality as a whole in its basic features.

The sole purpose of this article has been to highlight this harmony, insofar as it enriches the academic study of what Bahá'u'lláh means by *God*, but also because an understanding of Avicenna's work and intellectual contribution provides a framework by which one might better comprehend the metaphysical significance of many of Bahá'u'lláh's theological statements, such as His affirmation that God is necessary or simple, that His creatures are contingent beings, or that His creation has neither beginning nor end. However, as expressed in the introduction—and I stress this unequivocally—the objective has decidedly not been either to state or to imply that Bahá'u'lláh's positions are, in any way, merely *derivative* from Avicenna, or at all reducible to his influence as the preeminent philosopher in the Islamic tradition. Likewise, I have not intended to imply that Bahá'u'lláh's theological teachings are, by any means, restricted to those themes in Avicenna's philosophy which He affirms and validates, however much one may esteem the importance of such metaphysical principles as necessary and contingent existence, concurrent causation, or emanation.

Nonetheless, I have endeavored to show—through citation and analysis of a diverse selection of Bahá'u'lláh's and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's works—that affirmations of Avicenna's theological ideas in the Bahá'í Writings are not due merely to an incidental convergence

of terminology, to the degree that Bahá'u'lláh lived in the Islamic world and inherited a certain intellectual and literary culture, but to demonstrate that Bahá'u'lláh's clearly stated views on God constitute a vindication of the metaphysical principles underlying Avicenna's argument for God's existence, and His nature, attributes, and creative act, in actual content and concept. Indeed, the Bahá'í Writings' affirmation of the content of Avicennian philosophical theology is incredibly rich in implication; it indicates that they validate the principles of rationality that underlie Avicenna's arguments, and that the content of Bahá'í metaphysics can be further understood through the study of the Islamic philosophical tradition, to discern areas of affirmation, as in the case of Avicenna, or difference, in the case of other Islamic thinkers.

Since there are a number of possible objections that could be brought to bear on the general argument of this article, I will try succinctly to address them, with broad historical strokes, and also to resolve possible misunderstandings as to what the arguments of this article actually entail regarding Avicenna's relation to the Bahá'í Faith. One could wonder, for example, if it is warranted to associate the relevant metaphysical principles that Bahá'u'lláh affirms with Avicenna especially, instead of seeing this affirmation as one pertaining to ideas that, by Bahá'u'lláh's time, had become mainstream in Islam itself due to the prevalence of Avicenna's thought over a millennium. Consequently, why should the Bahá'í scholar study Avicenna himself, and take Bahá'u'lláh's theology as particularly vindicative of *his* theological philosophy? Even if this objection were largely correct—though I think it slightly misses the mark—it would still be fruitful to consider these theological arguments and doctrines at the source, so to speak, and to consider the rational basis, as explicated by Avicenna, of those philosophical-theological doctrines that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá so consistently affirm, in order to demonstrate, and to have a firmer understanding of, their coherence, rigorous logic, and conceptual depth. Indeed, if Avicenna's ideas were so powerful as to have become mainstream, the need to understand Avicenna himself would be commensurately intensified.

However, the real situation is much more complex. After Avicenna, philosophy or *falsafih* did indeed become especially associated with his ideas in the Islamic world, and more generally with the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic tradition Avicenna himself inherited, refined, and profoundly shaped. Nonetheless, subsequent thinkers not only adopted and developed his ideas, but also challenged and argued against them. In the succeeding generation, for example, the widely influential Persian thinker Ghazálí composed a famous polemic against twenty propositions implied by or related to Avicenna's thought, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (*Taháfutu'l-Falásifih*), and he especially took issue with

Avicenna's ostensibly heretical notions such as the eternity of the world; his characterization of the nature of God's knowledge; and his doubt, suggested in several places, as to the bodily resurrection, insofar as he defends a purely spiritual view of the afterlife in his metaphysical works—in agreement with the Bahá'í perspective.[26] Ghazálí, in addition, argued for occasionalism—which holds that there are no necessary causal relations in nature, but only direct actions of God's arbitrary will—against the Avicennian notion that natural entities have causative powers and necessary relations in their own right, even though they ceaselessly depend on God for their existence. It is the Avicennian notion, however, that the Bahá'í Writings affirm, as evidenced by the passages on causation considered throughout this paper, and the following statement from 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "By nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things" (*Tablet* 13).

Furthermore, the generally fideistic school of Ash'arite theology, from which Ghazálí more or less operated, became far more mainstream in Sunni Islam, the dominant branch of the faith, than Avicenna's rationalist philosophy. And indeed, Ash'arite-influenced theologians were generally opposed to some of those relevant metaphysical ideas Avicenna and the Bahá'í Writings affirm, such as the distinction between essence and existence, the presence of necessary causal connections in the world, and a robust affirmation of divine simplicity.[27] Moreover, philosophy itself, in succeeding centuries, was often looked at askance in the Islamic world, or even thought heretical, while jurisprudence became the chief expression of religion among Islamic scholars. Indeed, although philosophy—whether of Avicenna's essentially Aristotelian approach, broadly Platonist "Illuminationist" thought (*Ishráqí*), or a synthesis of the two—was indeed practiced in the Shia milieu of Early Modern Iran by the School of Isfahan, its practitioners were often persecuted or condemned by the 'ulamá, even while the philosophical tradition itself, so beautifully embodied by Avicenna, was "by and large abandoned in the rest of the Islamic world," as expressed by the historian Abbas Amanat (114). Accordingly, it is not reasonable to diminish the degree to which Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá actually vindicate and validate the arguments and conclusions,

26 Fazlur Rahman expresses this more starkly, when he writes that "in general" Avicenna "taught that the resurrection of the body was an imaginative myth with which the minds of the Prophets were inspired in order to influence the moral character of the unthinking masses" (119).

27 As Marmura notes: "For the Ash'arites, the divine attributes . . . are co-eternal with the divine essence . . . but are not identical with it. They are attributes 'additional' (*zā'ida*) to the divine essence. This point is quite basic, particularly for understanding al-Ghazálí's rejection and condemnation of the philosophical doctrine of an eternal world" (141).

characteristic of Avicenna himself and not Islamic theologians considered generally, regarding causation, contingent and necessary existence, the distinction between essence and existence, and God's nature, attributes, and creative act.

Another objection, however, may contend that this article has exaggerated the Avicennian character of the principles discussed, insofar as certain Islamic philosophers and thinkers after Avicenna—such as Ibn 'Arabí, Mullá Ṣadrá, Mír Dámád, Sabzivárí, and even Shaykh Aḥmad Aḥsá'í—have variously and to differing degrees discussed some of the ideas treated in this paper. It should be kept in mind, however, that this article does not make any exclusive claim in demonstrating Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation of Avicenna's ideas, as though Avicenna is the only philosopher who has arguments validated in the Bahá'í Faith, nor does it suggest that the whole of Avicenna's philosophy, beyond the matters explicitly treated here, has the *imprimatur* of Bahá'u'lláh. Indeed, Ian Kluge has done impressive work demonstrating the Aristotelian and Neoplatonic principles affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh, and this article is fully complementary to and supportive of such scholarship, insofar as Avicenna himself inherited and further refined those traditions, and works within classical theism more broadly, as shall be discussed below.

Nonetheless, when *later* philosophers in Islam argue for or develop ideas first articulated in their mature forms by Avicenna, such as the distinction between essence and existence and contingent and necessary being, they are doing so as influenced directly or indirectly by him, and arguably none of them enjoys the degree of eminence, influence, historical relevance, and synthetic genius Avicenna is generally recognized as possessing, with the possible exception, *outside* Islam, of Thomas Aquinas among medieval philosophers. Therefore, not to recognize the Avicennian character of the principles here discussed is no more reasonable than to deny that the doctrine of the four causes,[28] for example, is Aristotelian, despite the fact that countless subsequent philosophers, including Avicenna, have adopted, defended, and clarified the concept.

Moreover, certain other philosophers in Islam, such as Suhravardí, are notable for starkly rejecting the Aristotelian heart of Avicenna's thought, even while the Bahá'í Faith, as convincingly argued by Ian Kluge in "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," reaffirms the basic metaphysics of Aristotle's thought, especially, I would add, as developed by Avicenna. In addition, in certain respects it is the particularly Avicennian stance that the Bahá'í Writings affirm, in contrast to those of later thinkers: the Avicennian distinction between essence and existence, for example, came to be undermined either by an emphasis solely on essence (as

28 Discussed in the section "Simplicity."

in Suhravardí's radical essentialism) or on existence (as in Mullá Ṣadrá's Heraclitan existentialism).[29] Likewise, some subsequent thinkers, influenced by Sufi mysticism, tended toward certain monistic or pantheistic ideas, at variance with Bahá'u'lláh's teaching, in contrast to Avicenna's chaste insistence on God's transcendence. Consequently, Avicenna is well-deserving of explicit attention in Bahá'í studies, and it is with this aim that this article has focused exclusively on Avicenna, and only alluded to or briefly mentioned other philosophers. Again, it should be stated that the purport of this article is *not* that Bahá'u'lláh's theology is reducible to Avicenna's thought as an historical antecedent. It has argued solely that Bahá'u'lláh's theology is *affirmative* of, not *derivative* from, those Avicennian ideas we have discussed.

I will note in closing, however, that the theological agreement between Bahá'u'lláh and Avicenna is no historical coincidence. Though Avicenna's thought has a particular affinity with the Bahá'í Faith, he is admittedly one in a long line of thinkers who support what is called *classical theism*, a view of God which recognizes Him as the one metaphysically ultimate and absolute reality, who completely transcends all things in His essence and yet imparts to them their very existence ceaselessly, and is thus "closer to a man than his life vein," as it is said in the Qur'án (50:16). Since the Bahá'í Faith evidently contributes to this tradition of classical theism, one could find points of substantive commonality between Bahá'u'lláh and philosophers such as Aristotle, Plotinus, and Augustine—before Avicenna—and Maimonides, Averroës, and Aquinas, after him. Nonetheless, in the sheer abundance of Avicennian propositions that Bahá'u'lláh validates, the affinities between Avicennian philosophy and the Bahá'í Faith should prove to be a rich field for future work and of special interest to Bahá'í scholars. In this connection, Avicenna may be taken to be one remarkably impressive and influential member of a broad, multi-faith philosophical-theological tradition whose relation to the Bahá'í Faith should be a matter of intensive study and consideration.

Despite the above points, however, one may still wonder whether recognizing the Avicennian themes in Bahá'u'lláh's metaphysics is anything more than a mere academic exercise. On the contrary, Avicenna's philosophy invests one with a powerful tool in understanding the conceptual, philosophical, metaphysical, and logical content and implications of Bahá'u'lláh's writings themselves. The Bahá'í Writings' affirmation of the distinction between essence and existence; of the two modalities of necessary and contingent being; of the necessary existence of

29 As discussed by Wisnovsky (111). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's position is decidedly Avicennian when He confirms that for contingent beings existence "is only one accident (*'araḍ*) among others that enter upon the realities of created things" (*Some Answered Questions* 337–38*; Muf̌ávaḍát* 203).

God; of a robust account of divine simplicity holding that God's attributes are identical to His essence; of the eternality of God's creation; and of the role of the intermediary principle of the First Intellect or Primal Will—such central affirmations are rendered intelligible, and their rational basis elucidated, through an appreciation of Avicennian metaphysics.

Avicenna can serve a vital role in Bahá'í studies for yet other reasons, however. First, Avicennian philosophy, with its insistence on rational demonstration in addition to its conformity to Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, could well prove to be an invaluable resource for Bahá'í scholars as they undertake the enterprise of articulating Bahá'í teachings, defending them, and clarifying their rational structure, just as 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged when He stated that in this day rational arguments (*dalá'il-i-'aqlíyyih*) are requisite for the people of the world (*Some Answered Questions* 8; *Mufávaḍát* 5). Avicenna's argument for God's existence, for example, is in full harmony with Bahá'í teaching, clarifies the content of Bahá'u'lláh's own theological statements, and illuminates the reasoning in support of God's existence found in the Bahá'í Writings. Second, one who has a foundation in classical, and indeed Avicennian, philosophy will more easily realize that Bahá'u'lláh's writings form a coherent and fully consistent metaphysical system. Matters such as God's existence, necessity, simplicity, and complete transcendence, as well as the contingent nature of the world, are revealed to be non-negotiable tenets of Bahá'u'lláh's system, nowhere contradicted in His writings though expressed in various ways depending on the character of His particular audience.

In this connection, it should be acknowledged that there has been a contrasting view, in the literature of Bahá'í scholarship, that Bahá'u'lláh "does not assert the truth of any particular metaphysical position," and even "denies that metaphysics itself is the core of religion" (Momen 38). It is naturally outside the scope of this article, in the space of a conclusion, to address this perspective fully, as it is expressed in the essay "The God of Bahá'u'lláh," which differs from this paper's account of the existence, consistency, and robust nature of definite metaphysical principles in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. It should first be noted that the thesis of "epistemological relativism," which "The God of Bahá'u'lláh" argues is operative in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, springs from a laudable goal of explaining how Bahá'u'lláh reconciles different faith traditions with contrasting metaphysical claims. Accordingly, it is suggested there that Bahá'u'lláh accomplishes this by generally teaching that "religious metaphysical truth is an individual truth which each person sees from his or her own viewpoint" (38).

Though there is indeed a kind of "perspectivism" implicit in the notion of progressive revelation—and though Bahá'u'lláh clearly notes, in a number of places, that differing perspectives qualify the truth values of

certain statements—it nonetheless seems to me that epistemological relativism is not plausible, in any strong formulation, *vis-à-vis* Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. This is because definite and intrinsically metaphysical and ontological claims, open to human knowledge—such as the existence of God, His transcendent reality, the station of Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God, the immortality of the human soul, the reality of objective moral obligation, and many others—are essential, even foundational, to the Bahá'í Faith, and consistently stated as true without qualification. In addition, it likewise seems to me that the thesis of epistemological relativism is supported by underemphasizing the remarkable conceptual consistency, over a lifelong ministry, of Bahá'u'lláh's writings, and by overemphasizing apparent disparities in them, which can be rather easily resolved, or even disappear, with reference to the evident metaphysical content of His explicit statements on the nature of God.

As a case in point, we may consider Momen's suggestion that some of Bahá'u'lláh's statements, such as "absolute existence is strictly confined to God" (*Gleanings* 157; *Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 165) are monistic or pantheistic, and substantively differ from other statements from Bahá'u'lláh that support what the article calls the "theistic view of God," which holds that God completely transcends the world. This statement from Bahá'u'lláh, which we discussed in the section "The Necessarily Existent in the Bahá'í Writings," does not entail any monism or pantheism when read in context. Bahá'u'lláh simply affirms in that passage that God alone exists necessarily, while other things exist contingently and conditionally, by asserting that essential or absolute existence is not preceded by a cause, and that such existence is limited to God (*Majmú'iy-i-Alváḥ-i-Mubárakih* 165). This statement from Bahá'u'lláh, therefore, actually confirms the transcendence and ontological distinction of God from a creation that exists contingently, and it is not at all a monist position differing from Bahá'u'lláh's other statements.

Consequently, and more generally, what is presented as two contrasting positions in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, "theism" and "monism," are in fact one consistent position, variously described and elaborated: God, even as Avicenna logically deduced and Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly affirms, is the Necessarily Existent and thus exists without a cause or on any condition, whereas all other things are contingently existent and thus depend on God ceaselessly as their ultimate cause. Shoghi Effendi expresses this metaphysical doctrine of Bahá'u'lláh—God's absolute transcendence and ontological distinction—succinctly when he writes:

> 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. (112–13)

Much more, of course, might be said to do justice to the arguments in "The God of Bahá'u'lláh." In closing, however, it should only be noted that, to the degree that there are explicit and implicit metaphysical principles in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we may regard Avicenna as an important ally in approaching the Bahá'í corpus as scholars determined to discover and understand the precise nature of Their teachings on the nature of reality.

It remains for future studies to illumine further what positions of past philosophers are affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh, and how the philosophical tradition of classical theism can be used to explicate, articulate, defend, and clarify the metaphysics and theology of Bahá'u'lláh. We may, nevertheless, remain confident in the explicit content of Bahá'u'lláh's unequivocal testimony to the existence, transcendence, singleness, and unity of the self-subsistent and infinite God, on Whom all things ceaselessly depend, from Whom they derive their being:

> Regard thou the one true God as One Who is apart from, and immeasurably exalted above, all created things. The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures. This is the true meaning of Divine unity. He Who is the Eternal Truth is the one Power Who exerciseth undisputed sovereignty over the world of being, Whose image is reflected in the mirror of the entire creation. All existence is dependent upon Him, and from Him is derived the source of the sustenance of all things. This is what is meant by Divine unity; this is its fundamental principle. (*Gleanings* 166; *Iqtidárát* 158)

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# Sycamore Fig

SELVI ADAIKKALAM ZABIHI

Today's path
edged in santolina
lined with worn terracotta fragments
sends dusty, conversational heat waves
to the noonday sun
brings me to the old sycamore fig
the patient bulk, uncompromising bark
the soft exhalation of cool leaf breath
settling from the dark reaches
of branches and berry-speckled foliage
It is silent about Who might have passed
or paused in its shade

I come close, hoping for an answer
and because of What lies beyond
with the next step am incorporated into the living wood
My head enters the trunk where the grain sways to the right
before continuing upward
I bend and conform
to a record of growth in dense matter
to an intrinsc logic
shaped by circumstance, to be sure
but not by choice

And doing so I understand that
burning slowly in my chest
are inner logics
I should and can choose to express
Realization comes like a deep intake
of tree-sweetened air

Sycamore tree in the gardens at Bahjí
CAROLINE VERHEJI THORNE

# Bahá'u'lláh's "Long Healing Prayer" ("*Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí*") in Light of a Metaphysics of Unity

DANIEL AZIM PSCHAIDA

*Abstract*

Designated as having "a special potency and significance," the Long Healing Prayer or "Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí" calls on 119 names of God in second-person invocations, supplicating spiritual forces for healing, protection, and guidance. While acknowledging those elements of Islamic worship with which this prayer engages, the author explores the originality and deep coherence of the prayer as expressed by its rhyme schemes, frequent alliterations, and structures organized around the number nineteen. Overall, this article aims to shed light on how the prayer functions as an invitation to meditate on God's names—names which not only give shape to the human capacity to recognize an ultimately unknowable God, but also represent for Bahá'ís the underlying significance of spiritual and physical reality in a metaphysics of unity and wholeness.

*Résumé*

Dotée d'une « puissance et d'une signification particulières », la longue prière de guérison ou « Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí » récite 119 noms de Dieu sous la forme d'invocations à la deuxième personne, suppliant les forces spirituelles de guérir, de protéger et de guider. Tout en reconnaissant les éléments du culte islamique que cette prière évoque de par sa formulation, l'auteur explore le caractère original et la profonde cohérence de cette prière, qui s'expriment par ses schémas de rimes, ses fréquentes allitérations et ses structures organisées autour du nombre dix-neuf. Dans l'ensemble, cet article met en lumière la façon dont la prière invite le croyant à méditer sur les noms de Dieu – noms qui confèrent à l'homme la capacité de reconnaître Dieu, ultimement inconnaissable dans son essence, et qui constitue aussi pour les bahá'ís une représentation du sens profond de la réalité spirituelle et matérielle dans une métaphysique d'unité et d'intégralité.

*Resumen*

Designada como dotada de "una especial potencia y sifgnificado", la Oración Larga de Curación o "Lawh-i-Anta'l-Káfí" invoca en segunda persona a 119 nombres de Dios suplicando fuerzas espirituales para curación, protección y guía. Mientras reconoce aquellos elementos de la adoración islámica con los cuales la oración se relaciona, el autor explora la originalidad y la profunda coherencia de la oración expresadas por sus esquemas de rima, aliteraciones frecuentes, y las estructuras organizadas alrededor del número diecinueve. En general, este artículo tiene el objectivo de esclarecer la manera que la oración funciona como una invitación a meditar acerca de los nombres de Dios-nombres que dan forma no solamente a la capacidad humana para reconocer a un Dios incognocible en última instancia, sino tambien representan para los Bahais el significado subyacente de la realidad espiritual y física en una metafísica de unidad y plenitud.

For Bahá'ís seeking healing for themselves or others, Bahá'u'lláh's 800-word Tablet (in Arabic) known as Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí or the Long Healing Prayer is often considered a most potent resource. The leitmotif of this prayer is the invocation of 119 of God's beautiful names in second person addresses, beginning with the verse "*Bika yá* (I call on Thee O) *'Alí* (Exalted One), *bika yá Vafí* (O Faithful One), *bika yá Bahí* (O Glorious One)."[1] Each new verse presents a set of three new names. After invoking a rich spectrum of names of God in rhyming (in Arabic-only) and rhythmic (in Arabic and in English) cadence, the prayer asks God to "to protect the bearer of this blessed Tablet, and whoso reciteth it, and whoso cometh upon it, and whoso passeth around the house wherein it is" and concludes with a supplication to God: "heal Thou, then, by it every sick, diseased and poor one, from every tribulation and distress, from every loathsome affliction and sorrow, and guide Thou by it whosoever desireth to enter upon the paths of Thy guidance, and the ways of Thy forgiveness and grace."[2]

I propose that the Long Healing Prayer's invocation of names of God is intended to guide the reciter to the fundamentally meditative act of engaging both mind and heart to recognize (*'irfán*) the Divine ever more deeply and completely; and therein lies its potency. In the Islamic tradition—in whose milieu this prayer was revealed—specific names of God are understood to have particular healing effects, and the Bahá'í Writings, for their part, assure the believer that real effects are created when one recites the sacred verses in the way of "them that have drawn nigh unto [God]" (*Gleanings* 295). An exploration of the content and structure of this prayer, however, suggests that this promise does not imply a mechanical activation of supernatural forces as if through a spell or charm. I suggest in this paper that the names of God found in this prayer, and their particular arrangement in verses, encourage the believer to meditate on the intimate relationship between the One and the many. The many—represented by the divine names themselves and alluding to the infinite diversity of created phenomena—are in their completeness, continually put in conversation, or dialectic, with the One which is their Source, Fashioner, Artist, and Caregiver. In contemplating the significance of these Divine Names and

1 *Vafí* would be pronounced as *Wafí* by a native Arabic speaker. A Bahá'í system of transliteration strives to follow the example of Shoghi Effendi who transliterated the Arabic *w* phoneme as the *v* phoneme, following a common Persian dialectal pronunciation of Arabic words. The reader can note that wherever there is *v* transliteration throughout this paper, the native Arabic speaker would pronounce this with a *w* in this prayer revealed almost completely in Arabic by Bahá'u'lláh.

2 All passages from the Long Healing Prayer quoted in this article are excerpted from *Bahá'í Prayers*, *A Selection of Prayers Revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, The Báb, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá*.

their relation to the One, the heart of the worshipper is invited to grow in intimacy with the Names; this intimacy, in turn, transforms the self, others, and the world. Each separate thing, each part, becomes whole through the recognition of its profound relationship to the Whole itself. In this paper, I call this vision of reality a "metaphysics of unity."

Designated by Shoghi Effendi—the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith—as having "a special potency and significance" (qtd. in *Bahá'í Prayers* 208), this prayer may be regarded as a "healing prayer," and not only in the sense of an aid to recovery from physical and psychological illness. Rather, just as "health" and "whole" have a shared etymology, this prayer may be understood as a *meditative willing* to facilitate wholeness in every sense of the word.[3] This prayer incorporates some central Islamic theological concepts and vocabulary, yet it is a unique and original composition, a significant contribution to the corpus of scripture in world religions that invites the worshippers to transform their orientation to health, illness, and wholeness through a vision of reality in which every part of existence is intimately connected to each other and to the One Reality. In this article, I will first provide some background about the prayer, before exploring its significance and structure, its Islamic precedents and its literary elements, all of which work together to transform the reader's consciousness by orienting it to a metaphysics of unity and wholeness.

## The Title

This prayer has been known as the "Long Healing Prayer" among English-speaking Bahá'ís, and other European languages typically translate its English title for their prayer books (Oración Larga de Curación in Spanish or Das Lange Heilungsgebet in German, for instance). Among Arabic and Persian speakers the closest equivalent name has been Lawḥ-i-Shafá' al-Ṭawíl ("The Long Healing Tablet"), while it is perhaps most commonly referred to as Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí (literally "Tablet of Thou the Sufficing") and Lawḥ-i-Shifá (Tablet of Healing). Thus, in some Bahá'í circles this work may be referred to as a "prayer" and in others a "tablet."

## The Prayer's Significance

Various published compilations of Bahá'í prayers contain this statement written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

> These daily obligatory prayers, together with a few other specific ones, such as the Healing Prayer, the Tablet of Aḥmad, have been invested by Bahá'u'lláh with a

3 See *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary* entries "Health" [ME *helthe*, fr. OE *hǣlth*, fr. *hāl*] (535) and "Whole" […fr. OE *hāl*…] (1351). The concepts are similarly linked in Arabic: *shifá* means "to heal," but also to "satisfy" or "make complete," "restore," and, by implication, "make whole."

> special potency and significance, and should therefore be accepted as such and be recited by the believers with unquestioning faith and confidence, that through them they may enter into a much closer communion with God, and identify themselves more fully with His laws and precepts. (*Bahá'í Prayers* 208)

Shoghi Effendi indicates, by name or category, five prayers as having "special potency and significance." Four of these prayers have been unambiguously identified, but which of Bahá'u'lláh's many revealed prayers is "the Healing Prayer" is not quite as certain.

Bahá'u'lláh revealed many prayers that have healing as their theme, including a short one that begins with "*Yá ilahí ismuka shifá'í wa dhikruka diwá'í*" ("Thy name is my healing, O my God, and remembrance of Thee is my remedy"), which is part of Bahá'u'lláh's Lawḥ-i-Ṭibb (commonly known as the Tablet to the Physician) on living healthfully.[4] This beautiful, pithy healing prayer has long been a favorite of Bahá'ís the world over. Shoghi Effendi included this prayer in *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh* (282). Shoghi Effendi did not translate the Long Healing Prayer during his lifetime, just as he did not translate many other important works of Bahá'u'lláh such as the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

Guidance from the Bahá'í World Centre suggests that it is likely the Long Healing Prayer that Shoghi Effendi referred to as being "invested by Bahá'u'lláh with a special potency and significance." In response to a query in this regard, the Department of the Secretariat of the Universal House of Justice is reported to have replied: "it is probably the one known as the Long Healing Prayer, but nothing specific about this has been located at this time" ("Healing Prayer"). In this letter, the Secretariat also quotes the assurance within the text of the Long Healing Prayer of its potency to heal and protect. Thus, while we cannot definitively say which healing prayer holds "a special potency and significance," the Long Healing Prayer does have a very strong claim to such a designation.

Bahá'ís may be inspired further in

4 Just as the opening line of the prayer "Create in me a pure heart, O my God, and renew a tranquil conscience within me . . ." bears a resemblance to Psalm 51:10 ("Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me" in the King James version of the Bible), the beginning of this short healing prayer bears a similarity to a line in a traditional prayer (*du'a'*), attributed to Imam 'Alí ibn Ṭálib and recommended by thirteenth-century Shia scholar Sayyid ibn Ṭáwús to be written down and worn as an amulet at all times: *Yá mani as'muha diwá'un wa dhikruha shifá'un* ("O He whose name is a remedy, whose remembrance is a healing").This line occurs in Hussein A. Rahim's translation (ibn Tálib 29), and can be found recited online at duas.org/mobile/dua-kumayl.html. This same line is recommended in "Miscellaneous Du-a'as for every illness, ache, fever" (Dua'a 282).

their usage of this prayer by anecdotes from the early annals of the Bahá'í Faith. Mírzá Ja'far-i-Yazdí, a former Shia religious scholar, upon embracing the Bahá'í Faith strove to serve Bahá'u'lláh and his fellow believers for the rest of his life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells this story of Mírzá Ja'far about their time together in the prison of 'Akká:

> [W]hen we were in the barracks he fell dangerously ill and was confined to his bed. He suffered many complications, until finally the doctor gave him up and would visit him no more. Then the sick man breathed his last. Mírzá Áqá Ján ran to Bahá'u'lláh, with word of the death. Not only had the patient ceased to breathe, but his body was already going limp. His family were gathered about him, mourning him, shedding bitter tears. The Blessed Beauty said, "Go; chant the prayer of Yá Sháfí—O Thou, the Healer—and Mírzá Ja'far will come alive. Very rapidly, he will be as well as ever." I reached his bedside. His body was cold and all the signs of death were present. Slowly, he began to stir; soon he could move his limbs, and before an hour had passed he lifted his head, sat up, and proceeded to laugh and tell jokes. He lived for a long time after that, occupied as ever with serving the friends. (*Memorials* 157–58)[5]

## Recensions and Translations, Provisional and Official

Bahá'í historians have not yet identified the year this prayer was revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. In its April 2020 response to an inquiry from an individual believer, the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice writes: "The identity of the recipient and the date of its revelation remain unknown, and we have no information about its use during the time of Bahá'u'lláh" (qtd. in Pschaida note 2). Some speculate that the prayer was revealed during the "'Akka period" (1868-1892).[6] Based on the account quoted above it seems to have been in use by the Bahá'ís in 'Akka within the first ten years of that period, the timeframe during which most of the exiles were still living in the barracks of the prison-city.

Two versions of the Arabic Long Healing Prayer have been published by Bahá'í publishers. The differences between them are quite negligible for such a long Tablet (96 percent is the

5 Another story is that of Shaykh Ṣádiq-i-Yazdí, who fell gravely ill from ileus while in Baghdad. Bahá'u'lláh told 'Abdu'l-Bahá to repeat "Thou the Healer!" [*Yá Sháfí*] while touching the distended area. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reports doing so and observing that the apple-sized swelling and coiling of the affected part instantly vanished (*Memorials* 43–44). However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá seems to state that only the words "*Yá Sháfí*" were intoned, rather than the entire Long Healing Prayer.

6 "Lawhu Anta'l-Kafi." *Internet Archive*.

same in both versions) but the few dissimilarities can still be jarring for someone who is intimately familiar with only one version.[7] In response to this author's enquiry, the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre writes that "[t]he most authentic version of the Long Healing Prayer in Arabic that has been identified is in the handwriting of Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín, and it is this version that served as the basis of the current authorized English translation" (qtd. in Pschaida note 2). Balyuzi (274–76) and Taherzadeh (*Revelation* vol. 1 25–26) note that Zaynu'l-Muqarrabín was a former doctor of Islamic law at the high rank of *mujtahid* who was known for his excellent calligraphy and for reliably transcribing Bahá'u'lláh's writings. This is the recension that I call the "Huva version" as it begins *Huva* (He is), while what I call the "Bismi version" distinctively begins *Bism-i-llah* (In the name of God). The latter is the Arabic version most commonly found online and in Bahá'í prayer phone apps, as well as in published prayer books such as *Tasbíḥ va Tahlíl* and *Ad'iyyih Ḥaḍrat-i-Maḥbúb*. The Huva version was most recently published in 1988 by the Persian Institute for Bahá'í Studies in Canada, in a book titled *Nafaḥát-i-Faḍl* ("Fragrances of Divine Favors").[8]

Apparently, the oldest translation of this Tablet into English was produced in September 1945 in New York City. In one available copy, the introduction on the typed page states that the translation was carried out by "Ali Kuli Khan and his daughter, Marzieh Gail"—both accomplished translators of the Bahá'í Writings. The introduction goes on to state:

> BAHÁ'U'LLÁH "invokes God through" 119 different Names and 41 refrains Healing, Guidance, Protection and Happiness to those who recite it; who cometh upon it, who walketh around the house in which it is.
>
> This very important prayer—carries great power—is very cleansing and effective. ("Long Healing Prayer")

Although the claim of "119 Names" in the introduction actually corresponds to the Huva version, this rendering lines up more closely with the Bismi version. However, lines 15-17 are inexplicably not part of this translation (or perhaps have been accidentally omitted by the typist). I have not been able to determine if these translators were aware of the Huva version when they translated the Bismi recension. At the time, Shoghi Effendi explained through his secretary that because this prayer is "one which, when rendered into English, loses much of its rich

7 For further details on the small differences between these two versions, as well as an attempted complete transliteration of the prayer's spoken Arabic, see Pschaida.

8 I wish to acknowledge Dr. Steven Phelps' assistance in identifying publications for each version.

imagery, he does not feel it is suitable at present for inclusion in a prayer book," (qtd. in Braun 10–11). Accordingly, as I mentioned earlier, he never translated this prayer, nor did Bahá'í publishing trusts include the translation by Khan and Gail. However, copies of this provisional translation were informally circulated among Bahá'ís before 1980.

In a letter dated 13 August 1980 to "all National Spiritual Assemblies," the Universal House of Justice—Head of the global Bahá'í community, overseeing quality and accuracy of all official translations of Bahá'í scripture—announced that it had "recently commissioned the translation into English of two of the important works of Bahá'u'lláh, namely the Long Healing Prayer and His Tablet . . . known to many in the West as the 'Fire Tablet.'" A copy of this translation was included in this letter, announcing its completion and approval (*Messages* 455). Soon the prayer books of the Publishing Trust of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States began including this translation, which is now also found on database websites of the Bahá'í Writings and in prayer book apps; it has also become the basis of further translations into other European languages. This translation corresponds to the Arabic of the Huva version. The analysis in this article is based on this version.

## Structure

As is typical of prayers and epistles revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Long Healing Prayer begins with a praise or affirmation of God's reality or attributes: "He is the Healer, the Sufficer, the Helper, the All-Forgiving, the All-Merciful." Tablets, prayers and epistles authored by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá typically begin with the Qur'anic "*Bismilláh*" (as can be observed in the Kitáb-i-Íqán and Kitáb-i-Aqdas) or with *Huva* (as in The Hidden Words) or *Huvalláh* ("He is God," pronounced *Hovalláh* in Persian). However, while other Tablets and prayers normally invoke only two or three names of God, the Healing Prayer begins with five. This could be seen as foreshadowing the theme of this work, which would seem to be the names of God themselves.

After the opening, the next forty verses invoke God in the second person *bika yá* ("I call on Thee O . . .") by His "most beauteous names," each verse introducing three new names.[9] Each verse finishes with the repeated refrain "Thou the Sufficing (*Anta'l-Káfí*), Thou the Healing (*va Anta'sh-Shafí*), Thou the Abiding (*va Anta'l-Báqí*), O Thou Abiding One (*yá Báqí*)!"

This prayer appears to be organized in structures of nineteen. Thirty-eight of these forty verses have nineteen words each. Each name of God is typically composed of two syllables or—if one pronounces the

9 Sometimes a new name has a shared three-letter root with another (previous) name. However, only the name *Ṣáni'* occurs twice in identical form (verses 14 and 17, translated first as "Fashioner," then as "Creator").

grammatical-markers—three.[10] Each verse, but for a few exceptions, also consists grammatically of thirty-eight syllables—twice nineteen.[11] Likewise, the Long Healing Prayer calls on the names of God 119 times in its forty verses of supplicatory invocations.[12] Ninety-one—nineteen reversed—words with Arabic roots are used in this Tablet.[13] While these characteristics of the Tablet are not apparent in translation, those who notice or are taught these numerological patterns cannot help but increase their admiration for this Tablet and its elegant structure. The number nineteen itself is significant in the Islamic tradition since the word for "one" (*wáḥid*) is equal to the number nineteen in the letter-to-number symbolic system called *abjad* (*w-* has a value of 6, *'-á-'* of 1, *-ḥ-* of 8, and *-d* of 4) (Schimmel, *Mystery* 224; Saiedi 106–7, 282). The use of nineteen does seem deliberate by the Author who—along with His predecessor the Báb—invests the numbers nine and nineteen with mystical significance as numbers that symbolize oneness, harmony, and unity in diversity.[14] Nine, as the highest single digit number, includes each lower number and so symbolizes completeness, harmony, and unity among the many, a concept frequently applied to religion and to humanity in Bahá'í teachings. Meanwhile, one is a number that symbolizes God as He is the one and only God.[15] The number nineteen takes on the symbolism of both nine and one, including unity in diversity.

10 The two exceptions are verse 3 in which the third name *Fard* (Single One) technically has only one syllable—or two when the grammatical marker at the end is pronounced—and verse 27 with its first divine name *Ján* ("Thou my Soul").

11 It should be noted that in various recitations of this prayer available online, whether featuring a native Arabic or Persian-dialectical pronunciation, only one reciter pronounces the grammatical marker at the end of each of the three names of God. Without these markers, most verses contain only thirty-five syllables when recited aloud. See Pschaida for links to many online recordings of this prayer.

12 This is counting the names that immediately follow "I call on Thee," not the repeated refrains "Thou the Sufficing . . ."

13 For this count, we assume that the word(s) *Ján* ("Soul") and *Jánán* (Beloved), found in verse 27 have shared roots. *Jánán* may be considered the Persian plural of the Persian and Arabic word *Ján* (with the Persian suffix *-án*), since both words share a range of meanings such as "dearest, sweetheart, life, spirit" (Steingass 352)

14 While the Bahá'í Writings also frequently find symmetry and symbolism in many numbers (1, 5, 9, and 19 being the most celebrated), the Bahá'í Faith does not endorse any system of magic, numerological or otherwise, and the number nine seems to have an essentially symbolic significance relating to completeness, harmony, and unity, according to Shoghi Effendi (qtd. in Hornby 415).

15 For Bahá'ís, it may also be said to be a symbol of the oneness and wholeness of human relationships, the single precious, interconnected ecology of our planet, the single animating inspiration of the world's sundry religions, and the unification of the human family through the common recognition of Bahá'u'lláh.

This unity in diversity may be applied to God and His perfections, to the beautiful diversity of the single human species, and also to the myriad phenomena of God's creation in which each phenomenon manifests attributes of its one Fashioner. In this way, the number nineteen itself symbolizes what I refer to as a "metaphysics of unity."

The three divine names introduced at the start of each verse typically rhyme with each other. For example, verse thirty-two reads "*Bika yá Ḥabíb, bika yá Ṭabíb, bika yá Jadhíb*"; all three words end in *-íb*, while the first two names rhyme even more completely with each other through the shared ending *-bíb*. Furthermore, the divine names in each line almost always have the same two-syllable (or three with grammatical markers) cadence. The consistent number of syllables, and the repetition and rhyming, of the divine names enhance the overall poetic, sonic, and meditative qualities of the Healing Prayer, giving it a musical effect. The Bahá'í World Centre notes:

> In the original Arabic of the Long Healing Prayer, the Prayer for the Dead, and the Prayer for the Fast beginning, "I beseech Thee, O My God," the refrains are composed of rhyming words which give them a lyrical, musical quality which promotes their evocative power. (qtd. in Hatcher 146)

Much of this same lyrical, musical quality has been maintained in translation through the repeated supplication "I call on Thee, O . . ." at the beginning of each verse, and the refrain "Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing, Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One" to close each verse.

Altogether, seventeen of the forty verses have a rhyming pattern that appears in at least one other verse elsewhere in the Tablet. For example, verses two, four, six, and twenty-seven all have the rhyming ending *-án*. Likewise, verses twenty and twenty-one each, back-to-back, feature the ending *-úm*:

> 20: *Bika yá Qayúm, bika yá Daymúm, bika yá 'Alúm*
> 21. *Bika yá 'Aẓúm, bika yá Qadúm, bika yá Karúm*

However, I was not able to identify a pattern governing when a given rhyming syllable reappears in a later verse in the Tablet.

Besides the internal rhyme in each set of three of divine names, and the occasional reoccurrence of rhyming patterns in different verses, the unity between the verses is reinforced by the repeating refrain "Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing, Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One!" that ends each verse: "*Anta'l-Káfi va Anta'sh-Sháfí va Anta'l-Báqí ya Báqí*." The consistent cadence or meter maintained throughout the invocation of divine names also strengthens the coherence and unity of the entire Tablet.

The Long Healing Prayer concludes with a paragraph of 160 words that begins by praising God with *subḥánaka*

*yá Alláhuma* (Sanctified art Thou), and then presents a series of beautiful images describing God's generosity and grace, before finally supplicating Him by His "most beauteous names . . . most noble and sublime attributes" to protect, heal, and guide whoever comes under the prayer's influence. The prayer ends with a meditative affirmation of eight more names, closing as it opens—in acknowledgement of God's names: "Thou art verily the Powerful, the All-Sufficing, the Healing, the Protector, the Giving, the Compassionate, the All-Generous, the All-Merciful."

## The Names of God: An Islamic Trope

The Jewish, Christian, Hindu, Zoroastrian, Sikh, and Bahá'í scriptures each conceive of, relate to, and worship God via His various names, perfections, and attributes. In the Islamic tradition this practice of connecting with God through His names gains official scriptural validation: "Say: Call upon *Alláh*, or call upon *Raḥmán*: by whatever name ye call upon Him, (it is well): for to Him belong the Most Beautiful Names. Neither speak thy Prayer aloud, nor speak it in a low tone, but seek a middle course between" (Qur'án 17:110). The phrase translated as "Most Beautiful Names" (*al-Asmá' al-Ḥusná*) also appears in Qur'án 7:180, 20:8, and 59:24. Due to the rich nuance of the word *ḥusná*, this phrase is variously rendered as Beautiful, Best, Fairest, Most Excellent, or Most Perfect Names, depending on the translator.[16] This passage presents the Ultimate Being as approachable by His generic name Alláh (the God) or by the particular name and attribute *Raḥmán* (Gracious, Beneficent, Merciful) or by another one of His beautiful names of perfection. The passage quoted above does not specify what these other names of perfection might be, but Surah 59:22–24 does list over twenty of them, such as *'Álim* (Knower), *Malik* (Sovereign), *Quddús* (Holy One), *Salám* (Source of Peace), and *Kháliq* (Creator). Ernst notes that the Qur'án itself contains over ninety-nine names of God (81).

Over the centuries, scholars of Islam have compiled lists of these names, based on these and other verses in the Qur'án, statements in the *ḥadíth*, and logical inferences about qualities attributable to a Being of perfection. Although God is believed to have innumerable names, and hundreds of such names have been compiled, focusing on God through lists of ninety-nine names became a prominent practice among Muslims due to influential *ḥadíth*:

> Alláh has ninety-nine names, i.e. one-hundred minus one, and whoever knows them will go to Paradise. (al-Bukhari 50:894)

16 For example, compare this verse's translations by Yusuf Ali, Muhsin Khan, Ghali, Muhammad Asad, Wahiduddin Khan, Laleh Bakhtiar, John Rodwell, and many others available at www.islamawakened.com/quran/17/110/default.htm.

> There are ninety-nine names of Alláh; he who commits them to memory would get into Paradise. Verily, Alláh is Odd (He is one, and it is an odd number) and He loves an odd number. (Muslim 48:5)

These same two ḥadíth found in the above Sunni compilations have also been transmitted into the Shia tradition through the very influential Islamic scholar and Imam Ja'far al-Ṣádiq, as the tenth century Shia scholar, Shaykh al-Ṣaduq tells us (209).

One of the most common lists of God's ninety-nine names came through a ḥadíth, from the collection of al-Tirmidhí in a chapter on supplication, said to have been narrated by Abu Hurairah (Book 48, ḥadith 138). A somewhat distinct listing was collected by ibn Májah—one of six major Sunni ḥadíth collectors—also in a chapter on supplication (Chapter 37, ḥadith 3861). While believing that the statement in the ḥadíth that God has ninety-nine names was authentic, Abu Ḥámid al-Ghazálí acknowledged skepticism about the reliability of the part of this ḥadíth that actually specifies or lists these names, both because of great differences in the *matn* (content) of different versions of the same ḥadíth and because it rests on the authority of just one companion and has only a single *isnád* or chain (175). While up to fifteen names differ between the various available lists, Islamic theologians have consistently clarified that this is not problematic, as God actually has more than ninety-nine names or perfections. According to al-Ghazálí, the wisdom of asserting ninety-nine names can be understood by imagining a king who has ninety-nine servants or soldiers whom no enemy can overcome. Even if that king actually has a thousand soldiers, the group of only ninety-nine is sufficiently powerful, just as a group of ninety-nine names of God is sufficiently abundant, awesome, and rich. It is a representation and selection of divine names that "bring together varieties of meanings which tell of [the divine] majesty which another set of meanings would not be able to bring together" (171–72). Similar to the symbolic significance of the number nine in the Bahá'í Faith, ninety-nine is a number of completeness or sufficiency in Islam.

That the Long Healing Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh is in dialogue with the Islamic tradition of calling upon God's names is made explicit by the use of the Qur'anic phrase *al-Asmá' al-Ḥusná* (most beauteous names) itself in the final paragraphs of this Tablet. While names of God are called upon 296 times in the entirety of the prayer, altogether 126 distinct names of God are called upon.[17] In Table 1, we can see the thirty-one names of God from the Long Healing Prayer that correspond to, or at least have the same three-letter roots and shared meaning, some of those ninety-nine names found in traditional Islamic lists.

17 This is when adding the opening verse and the closing paragraph to the 119 names in the body of the prayer.

Table 1: 99 Names of God in the Islamic tradition and the Long Healing Prayer that are the same or similar

| **Al-Ghazali / Tirmidhi / ibn Majah lists** | **Long Healing Prayer** | **Al-Ghazali / Tirmidhi / ibn Majah lists** | **Long Healing Prayer** |
|---|---|---|---|
| ‘Adl (The Just) | ‘Adl (Just One) | Laṭíf (Benevolent) | Laṭúf (Most Benevolent One) |
| Aḥad (The One) | Aḥad (Peerless One) | Máni‘ (The Withholder) | Máni‘ (Withholding One) |
| ‘Alím (The Omniscient) | ‘Alím (Omniscient) | Mu’min (The Faithful) | ’Imán (my Faith) |
| ‘Alí (The Most High) | ‘Alí (Exalted One) | Náfi‘ (He who benefits) | Náfi‘ (Beneficent One) |
| ‘Aẓím (Tremendous) | ‘Aẓím (Most Great One) | Núr (Light) | Núr (Light) |
| ‘Azíz (The Eminent) | ‘Azíz (Mightiest One, Powerful) | Qádir (All-Powerful) | Qádir (Almighty) |
| Alláh (The God) | ’lláhumma, yá Iláhí (O my God) | Qayyúm (Self-Existing) | Qayyúm (All-Compelling) |
| Báqí (The Everlasting) | Báqí (Abiding One) | Quddús (The Holy) | Quddús (Most Holy) |
| Da’im (Eternal) | Daymún (Ever-Abiding) | Ra’úf (All-Pitying) | Raú’úf (Compassionate) |
| Fattáḥ (The Opener) | Fattáḥ (Unfastener) | Ráfi‘ (Exalter) | Ráfi‘ (Exalting One) |
| Ghafúr (All-Forgiving) | Ghafúr (All-Forgiving) | Raḥím (Merciful) | Raḥím (All-Merciful) |
| Ḥáfiẓ (All-Preserver) | Ḥáfiẓ (Protector) | Raḥmán (Gracious) | Raḥman (Clement One) |
| Ḥakím (Wise) | Ḥakím (Most Wise) | Ṣamad (The Eternal) | Ṣamad (Eternal One) |
| Jalíl (The Majestic) | Jalíl (Most Sublime One) | Vahháb (The Bestower) | Vahháb (Bestowing One) |
| Jámi‘ (The Uniter) | Jámi‘ (Gathering One) | Ẓáhir (The Manifest) | Ẓáhir (Manifest One) |
| Karím (Generous) | Karím (the All-Generous) | | |

In Table 2 are fifty-one of eighty-nine names of God found in the Long Healing Prayer that are *not* typically found in the lists from Islamic *ḥadíth*.[18]

18 For the sake of brevity, in cases where there are multiple Names with the same Arabic three-letter roots, sometimes only one of these Divine Names is listed in this chart. For example, while the Long Healing Prayer contains both *Subḥán* (Most Praised One) and *Subúḥ* (Most-Lauded), the table only lists *Subúḥ*.

Table 2: Some divine perfections in the Long Healing Prayer that are not typically found in traditional Islamic lists of the 99 Names of God

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ʻÁshiq (The Best Lover) | Ján (my Soul) | Naṣṣáḥ (Counselor) |
| ʻAṭúf (Kind to All) | Káfí (Sufficing) | Nuzúh (Sanctified One) |
| Bádhil (Generous One) | Káshif (Unfolder) | Qáliʻ (Uprooter) |
| Bahí (Glorious One) | Láfiẓ (Lord of Utterance) | Qániʻ (Satisfier) |
| Bahháj (Bringer of Delight) | Láḥiẓ (All-Seeing) | Rúḥ (Spirit) |
| Báligh (Perfecting One) | Maʻádh (Shelter to all) | Sábigh (Bountiful One) |
| Balláj (Brightener) | Maḥẓúẓ (Lord of Joy) | Ṣániʻ (Fashioner) |
| Dayyán (Judge) | Majdhúb (Enraptured One) | Sáqí (Quencher of Thirsts) |
| Dháwit (Source of all Being) | Maládh (Haven for all) | Sháfí (Healing) |
| Faḍḍál (Bountiful One) | Malḥúẓ (Desired One) | Subúḥ (Most Lauded) |
| Fáliq (Lord of the Dawn) | Maʻmúr (Frequented by All) | Sulṭán (Sovereign) |
| Fard (Single One) | Mustaʻán (Helping One) | Ṭabíb (Physician) |
| Fárigh (Unfettered One) | Nábit (Life-Giving One) | Ṭáliʻ (Rising One) |
| Ghá'ib (Concealed One) | Naffáth (Quickening One) | Thábit (Constant One) |
| Ghálí (Most Precious One) | Najjáḥ (Deliverer) | Vafí (Faithful One) |
| Ghálib (Triumphant One) | Náshif (Ravager) | Vahháj (Enkindler) |
| Ghayáth (Succorer of all) | Naṣír (Sustaining One) | Váthiq (the Most Trusted) |

From this table and the discussion thus far, we can infer that Bahá'u'lláh was neither seeking to affirm a particular list in the Islamic traditions of God's ninety-nine names nor to present an altogether new one in His composition of the *Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí*. Rather, as seems to be typical of Revelation, the Author makes use of vocabulary, literary forms, and concepts that are familiar to His recipients, repurposing and combining these building blocks of the cultural-religious-linguistic milieu in new ways to convey those truths He wishes—or is called upon—to communicate.[19]

## Dhikr and Prayer Beads

*Dhikr*—recollecting, remembering, bringing to mind, mentioning, or praising God—is a central Islamic concept and ritual practice through which the Muslim strives to focus on the Ultimate and become more and more aware of His omnipresent, absolute Reality at every moment. *Dhikr* is frequently practiced by repeating the Names of God, and related phrases of praise, as a kind of mantra; this is done both individually and in the communal rituals of Sufi groups. Depending on the Sufi order and the school of practice, one may recite the names or praises of God silently or out loud, including in song, but it is considered most essential to recollect God in the heart (whether the tongue is used or silent) until one's innermost consciousness is engaged (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 167, 171).

The most prominent practice of repetition of divine names in *dhikr* among Muslims is usually facilitated by a string of thirty-three or ninety-nine prayer beads—called *tasbíḥ* or *subḥa*. This practice is not only found among those formally associated with Sufi orders; many other Muslims carry and regularly use prayer beads.[20] Depending on the individual believer—and based on their upbringing, their Islamic mentors, or their personal preference—this practice may consist of mentioning one divine name per bead until all ninety-nine names have been invoked, or of repeating a set of divine names multiple times. Within a Sufi order, the *shaykh*

19 We should note that in a Bahá'í point of view, the building blocks are not simply old pieces rearranged; Bahá'u'lláh states that they are themselves "made new," and that "[i]nto every word that God doth speak a new spirit is breathed, and the breezes of life are wafted therefrom upon all things" (Additional Tablets).

20 For some Sufis prayer beads are more of a distraction than a helpful tool for *dhikr*, and to some degree so are the divine names themselves, since remembrance of God's names should be constant, not as an end in itself, but as a doorway to Divine experience, knowledge, and communion. On the other hand, for some Muslims a set of prayer beads—having been constantly handled in the context of praising God's names (and perhaps passed down over multiple generations and/or from an individual regarded as saintly)—imbibes sacred power or *baraka* and becomes in itself a kind of talisman.

(spiritual teacher) carefully chooses for the novice or veteran student the exact formula needed to spiritually advance, according to that student's psychological condition, as a physician would mix medicinal ingredients (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 103–4). For example, the student trying to master hope may receive a different *dh̲ikr*-formula than one working on renunciation or on complete trust in God (169–70). Another student might simply be prescribed the repetition of the name "Alláh" day and night so that God would always be in their heart and mind, whether awake or sleeping.[21]

Today, Muslims seeking to advance their sense of mystical connection will frequently look to the world-wide web for *dh̲ikr* formulas, consisting of various phrases of praise, such as *Subḥana Alláh* (Glory is to Alláh), *Al-Hamdu Lilláh* (Praise is due to Alláh), and *Alláhu Akbar* (Alláh is the Great). Many different names of God are featured in these formulas. One website of the Shia Islamic tradition lists 128 names of God, discussing for each one the benefits that can derive from repeating that divine name—from being in the company of angels through reciting *al-Aḥad* (The One), to raising one's status by reciting *al-'Alí* (The Highest), to improving eye ailments by reciting *Al-Baṣír* (The All-Seeing) (Zaidi). In fact, about a dozen of the names discussed on this site are claimed to have curative effects—from healing broken relationships (*Wadúd* [Loving] or *Waḥíd* [Singular]), to scorpion bites (*al-Wási'* [Ample-giving]) or snake bites (*al-Aḥad*), to cure-alls (*Salám* [Peace] and *Sh̲áfí* [Healing]). Sunni Islam shares this traditional belief in the curative and protetcitve effects of invoking the names of God in ritual ways (Trimingham 28).[22] Ibn 'Aṭa' Alláh, an influential Sufi teacher of the thirteenth century, taught that the names of God, when called upon, are potent cures for illness, but they are only effective as a remedy when they have a logical connection with the desired effect; the cure occurs through a kind of transformation of the consciousness of the person performing *dh̲ikr* (*Sufism* 93–94). This background helps us understand the cultural milieu in which Bahá'u'lláh's Long Healing Prayer was initially received, and we may imagine that someone with such an Islamic background reading this prayer may see in a specific name the power to cure a specific kind of ailment or solve a particular difficulty.

21 My former Arabic teacher from Egypt, who would constantly carry his prayer beads, told me that he focuses on thanking God through two divine names: "I usually say *Yá Allah* (O God) *Yá Karím* (O Generous One) because I feel that God is so generous with me even if I don't do what I must do towards Him."

22 Beyond calling upon God's names in *dh̲ikr* for healing or protection, another common practice for Muslims has been to imbibe potions made from the ink, saffron, or another substance which has been used to write God's names (Ernst 90–91).

## Dhikr and Prayer Beads in the Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith does not have a prescribed ritual of repeating either ninety-nine names of God or a handful of names of God ninety-nine times. However, Bahá'u'lláh decreed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that each day "every believer in God, the Lord of Judgement" should perform ablutions, "seat himself and, turning unto God, repeat" the Most Great Name "Alláh-u-Abhá" ninety-five times. "Such was the decree of the Maker of the Heavens when, with majesty and power, He established Himself upon the thrones of His Names" (¶18). Believers "repeat" (literally, *yudhakir*—from the same triliteral Arabic root as *dhikr*) *Alláh-u-Abhá*, meaning "God the All-Glorious," individually and alone. There are relatively few prescriptions for how exactly to perform this daily ritual. The method for counting to ninety-five is left to the choice of the individual Bahá'í; some choose to employ prayer beads, while others count to nineteen using the phalanges and tips of the fingers of one hand, repeating this process for five cycles to reach ninety-five.[23] Each individual may find various ways of focusing their mental energy, images, and thoughts; there is no extensive survey of strategies in this regard in existing Bahá'í literature. Shoghi Effendi explains in a letter written on his behalf in 1925:

> mere mechanical repetition of the syllables is not referred to. The utterance of the word must be accompanied by the turning of the heart to God. When we turn to God with our whole heart and invoke His Name, a spiritual connection is established through which we become a channel of divine influence. (qtd. in Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, Memorandum dated 15 September 2003)

In this letter, the Research Department also quotes a statement written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice on 4 January 1991 to an individual Bahá'í, elucidating the purpose and effects of this devotional practice: "As a devoted believer in Bahá'u'lláh, you have the privilege of using the Greatest Name and the revealed prayers to draw on the power of the Holy Spirit, which is your shield and your protection through any difficulties and which will bring reassurance and serenity to your heart."

Although many divine names of God can be found throughout revealed Bahá'í prayers, it is the recital of the Long Healing Prayer that, after the daily repetition of *Alláh-u-Abhá*, is the most prominent devotional act in which a Bahá'í meditates upon and praises God's names. According to their

23 Both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá owned prayer beads. See, for example Taherzadeh (*Revelation* vol. 4; *Covenant* 200) and Gail (200). Shoghi Effendi clarified that the use of prayer beads is neither required nor prohibited for Bahá'ís (qtd. in Hornby 462).

personal preference, some Bahá'ís say the prayer rarely or only on very special occasions, while others might say the prayer daily—for instance, a physician reciting the prayer each morning before work.

## Islamic Predecessors to the Long Healing Prayer

Although not specified as a healing prayer per se, a beautiful predecessor in the Islamic tradition to Bahá'u'lláh's Long Healing Prayer is likely the prayer of *Bahá', credited to the fifth Shia Imam* Muḥammad al-Báqir. This prayer, variously referred to as Du'á' al-Bahá' (Prayer of Glory) or Du'á' al-Saḥar (Dawn Prayer), is about twenty-three verses long, and is repeated by Shia Muslims at night or in pre-dawn during the Ramadan month of fasting. Each verse focuses upon a divine name, or two, by which to beseech God: from *Bahá'* (Splendor/Glory) in verse one, to *Jamál* (Beauty) in verse two, *Jalál* (Glory/Splendor) in verse three, and *Jabarút* (Omnipotence) in the last verse. The first verse, in a stirring translation by Stephen Lambden, supplicates: "O my God! I beseech Thee by Thy Splendor (*Bahá'*) at its most Splendid (*Abhá'*) for all Thy Splendor (*Bahá'*) is truly resplendent (*Bahíy*). I, verily, O my God! beseech Thee by the fullness of Thy Splendor (*Bahá'*)" (al-Báqir). In its mode of short, pithy, supplications of the Divine Names, it may be regarded as a preeminent forebear of Bahá'u'lláh's Long Healing Prayer.

Indeed, a vital importance of the Du'á' al-Bahá' to the Bahá'í Faith may be found in the Báb's choice of the first nineteen divine names found in this prayer for the names of the nineteen months of the Badí' calendar.[24] Bahá'u'lláh clarified some details of the Báb's revealed calendar and made it the official Bahá'í calendar.

Although, as mentioned above, the Du'á' al-Bahá' is not explicitly a healing prayer, healing prayers have a prominent place within the Islamic tradition, for both Sunnis and Shias. A popular Sunni healing prayer from the *ḥadith* reads: "O Alláh, the Lord of the people! Remove (*Aṯhhib*) the trouble (*al-bá'sa*) and heal (*aṣẖfi*), for You are the Healer (*al-Ṣẖáfí*). No healing (*ṣẖifá'*) is of any avail but Your healing (*ṣẖifá'úka*); healing (*ṣẖifá'an*) that will leave behind no ailment (*saqaman*)."[25] (al-Bukhari, 76:57) While it does not invoke many names of God, this prayer is similar to Du'á' al-Bahá' in that it intensely focuses on various forms of a single triliteral root (*ṣẖ-f-ú*). Bahá'u'lláh's Long Healing

24 This calendar consists of nineteen months of nineteen days plus four to five "intercalary" days. Nineteen also is a number of some significance in the Qur'án. For example, there is a group of nineteen angels mentioned in 74:30. The Qur'án is organized into 114 chapters—a multiple of nineteen—and the *bismillah* may be counted as having nineteen letters (if one does not count the dagger-alif between the 'm' and 'n' in *al-raḥmán*).

25 Note: There are some variations of the morphologies of individual words of this prayer.

Prayer utilizes a similar literary device through the repeating line at the end of each verse: "Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing (*Sháfí*), Thou the Abiding (*Báqí*), O Thou Abiding One (*yá Báqí*)." Both prayers use repetition to continually reaffirm in the reader a vision of God as Healer.

The central theme in many of the Islamic healing prayers is God's perfections. The following fascinating Shia prayer—traditionally attributed to the Imam 'Alí—focuses the worshipper on the name of God *Azal* (Eternal) and variations on its three-letter root (*z-ú-l*). It closes with derivations on a three-letter root *r-ḥ-m* in speaking of God's mercy. It also includes affirmations of two other names of God, and—if recited three times a day—is promised to cure any sickness. It reads:

> Alláh is eternal (*Qadímun*), everliving (*Azalíyun*); He removes (*yuzillu*) suffering (*al-'alala*); He is self-subsisting (*Qá'imun*), ever-existing (*Azalíyun*) by His eternity (*Azalíyati*), neither perishes nor ceases to exist (*lam yazal wa la yazálu*). By Your mercy (*bi-Raḥmatika*), O the most beneficent (*yá Arḥama-l-ráḥimín*). ("Miscellaneous Du-a'as" 286)

The flow of this prayer can be likened to a creative choreography, in which the repetition of *-zal-* and *-zil-* (of the *z-ú-l* root letters) in a play on words juxtaposes their interacting meanings—ever-continuing and ceasing, infinity and finitude. God is presented as the Life that gives life and health, the Maker of both abundance and the limits that are required for balance, the Remover of disease, suffering, and illness. The interplay of two divine names starting with Q—*Qadímun* and *Qá'imun*—reinforces a conceptualization of God as the eternal Foundation of life and the universe. At the same time, through focused concentration on forms of words for Mercy (from the root *r-ḥ-m*), delicately introduced with the single-letter preposition *b-* ("by," "through," or "with"), the prayer reminds us that the beneficial workings of all these other divine names are by the fundamental attribute of Mercy or Grace.

As is discussed below, the dancing interplay between divine names is found throughout Bahá'u'lláh's Long Healing Prayer. In each verse, the prayer presents a new set of three divine names, inviting the worshipper to meditate not only on the meaning of each name in the set but also on the relationship of each name with the others. Additionally, the repeated "Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One" (*Anta'l-Báqí yá Báqí*) at the end of each verse calls the seeker of healing to meditate upon the realities of this attribute in particular, just as the various words for "Mercy" do in the above-mentioned Islamic prayer.

## The Greatest Name and Charisms

Various Muslims have claimed to know the greatest of the names of God—either one of the ninety-nine or the hundredth—and that knowing this

name gave them charisms, or spiritual, supernatural powers (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 177; *Deciphering* 119). In Abrahamic traditions, knowing God's truest, hidden names has been associated with the ability to work miracles, as evidenced by Jewish and Islamic tales of prophets who were able to achieve the impossible because of the secret names of God, such as those written on Moses' staff or on Joseph's cloak (Fodor 107–8, 110). Within Islamic history, various names have been proposed as the greatest, perhaps most popularly Allah itself. Al-Ghazálí said "Alláh" itself is "the greatest of the names (*Á'ẓim'l-Asmá'*) . . . because it refers to the essence which unites all the attributes of divinity, so that none of them is left out, whereas each of the remaining names only refers to a single attribute" (Al-Ghazálí 51). *Raḥmán* or *Raḥím*, which are God's most emphasized names in the Qur'án, and *Váḥid* (One, Singular) and *Huva* (He/He is) have also been commonly nominated. Al-Ghazálí cited a *ḥadíth* in which the supreme name of God is promised to be contained in Qur'án verse 2:163, "Your God is One (*Váḥid*); there is no God save He (*Huva*), the Gracious (*Raḥmán*), the Merciful (*Raḥím*)," and in Qur'an 3:1–2, "'Alif Lám Mím. Alláh! There is no God save He (*Huva*), the Living (*Ḥayu*), the Eternal Sustainer (*Qayyúm*)" (al-Ghazálí 173).[26] The Báb discussed an Islamic *ḥadíth* in which *Alláh*, *Tabáraka* (Blessed), and *Ta'álá* or *'Alí* (Exalted)—and their numerical, symbolic corollaries *Huva* and *Káfí* (Sufficing)—are disclosed as the Most Great Names of God (Saiedi 105–7).[27] A fourth name has been kept hidden, yet the Báb (the Gate) hints that it is His own name or that of *Bahá'* (Glory). Interestingly, many of the above-mentioned names posited as the greatest name are found in the Healing Prayer in positions of particular prominence. Thus, Bahá'u'lláh begins the Healing Prayer with *Huva* in the introductory invocation, the very first verse contains both *'Alí* and *Bahí*, *Raḥman* is in the sixth verse and *Raḥím* is in the opening and closing, and *Káfí* is in the opening, closing, and the repeating refrain.

From 1848, at the Conference of Badasht, Bahá'u'lláh, whose given name was Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Núrí, then a leading Bábí, began to be known as Bahá or Bahá'u'lláh. At this Conference, each day a new Tablet was revealed and chanted for the attendees, and a new name was bestowed upon each of the eighty-one assembled believers.[28] In the ensuing decades, Mírzá

26 Note: The translated text inaccurately cites chapter and verse, which I have corrected above. For a discussion of "Alláh" as either just one of the names of God, or the all-encompassing name, see Louis Gardet, "al-Asmá' al-Ḥusná," *Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd edition*.

27 Saiedi explains in more depth that *Huva* and *Káfí* are symbolic corollaries of *'Alí* through their numerological value in the abjad system of translation in which the letter-values in *'Alí* [110] have an intimate relation with *Huva* [11] and *Káfí* [111].

28 The historical sources (*Dawn-Breakers* 293; *God Passes By* 31)

Husayn 'Alí Núrí more and more often used a combination of Bahá with Alláh for His own name, a name He would later affirm as "The Most Great Name" in His writings. As Alláh is the Being believed to have all names and perfections, we might venture that Bahá'—meaning glory, splendor, radiance, and light—can be likened to light that contains the full spectrum of colors and energy waves. Bahá'u'lláh may thus be viewed as the name that includes all divine names.[29]

The Greatest Name is believed by many within the Islamic tradition to have miraculous power, including that of restoring health, and two of Bahá'u'lláh's well-known prayers include the statement that God's "name is my healing" (*Prayers and Meditations* 174, 262). Whether the integration of the name Bahá' itself into the Long Healing Prayer is intended for meditative, talismanic, or transformative purposes is a question that will be discussed further below. For now, we might propose that the many names of God in the Long Healing Prayer be considered as parts of the spectrum of the light of the name Bahá', which includes them all. Thus, for a Bahá'í, through the contemplation of these names, the Long Healing Prayer acts as a portal to the heaven of the Divine Reality.

## Poetic Combinations of Divine Names

Bahá'u'lláh's Long Healing Prayer integrates elements of supplication, praise, and affirmation, and also invites meditation. First, the one who recites the Tablet expresses their ardent desire for healing and protection. Second, the Tablet has the reader express praise, adoration, or magnification of the glorious Divine Reality in familiar second-person language (-*ka* [Thee], *Anta* [Thou]), facilitating a mystical I-Thou encounter between one's self and one's Lord.[30] Third, through the *bika* (I call on Thee) preceding each divine name, the Tablet encourages the reader to deepen their sense of the Divine Reality by contemplating the significance of each individual divine name in itself. Lastly, the poetic interplay between the names in each verse prompts the reader to meditate upon the interrelationships

leave the question of whether it was the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh who was conferring the new names somewhat open. Whoever was the immediate source, the Báb in later letters would confirm these new names (*Dawn-Breakers* 293).

29 This statement and analogy is my personal understanding; I know of no authoritative explanation on what makes *Bahá* God's greatest name, apart from Bahá'u'lláh decreeing it to be so. However, there have been various investigations by Bahá'í authors into the Greatest Name. See, for example, Abu'l Qasim Faizi's ""Explanation of the Symbol of the Greatest Name" and Stephen Lambden's ""The Word Bahá: Quintessence of the Greatest Name."

30 This concept is borrowed from Jewish philosopher Martin Buber who, in his celebrated work *I and Thou*, meditates upon the sacrality of a personal and genuine relationship, whether between two humans or between a human and God.

between each set of divine names. In a metaphysics of unity, each divine name is in itself inexhaustible in significance as an expression of the One; at the same time, each divine name is allowed to speak to each of the others in an intimate relationship and all three names are meditated upon as to their interweaving application to the human-ethical-social contexts and the natural world.

A few examples of what meditation within a metaphysics of unity could look like may be helpful to the reader. In the Long Healing Prayer, each divine name is not simply treated as one of many that are all called upon together in a list; instead, each name is presented to be called upon individually. In the Arabic original, *bika yá* (I call on Thee O . . .) precedes each of the initial three names in the verse. In the English translation, while the "I call on Thee" only begins the verse itself, the invocation honoring the dignity of each divine name is preserved with the "O" preceding each name. Thus, instead of reading lightly over each name as merely part of a string of words, the person praying may be moved to pause and contemplate the profundity of this single attribute as a personal name of God, a kind of individual precious pearl or gem on the string. For example, in the third verse, "*Bika yá Aḥad bika yá Ṣamad bika yá Fard*," having paused to reflect on the pearl of *Aḥad* (Peerless One), one is also moved to pause at *Ṣamad* (Eternal One) as a gem-like, infinitely rich in meaning, name of God in itself. One might reflect on the temporal (always present before, now, after) or spatial (pervading here, there, everywhere) implications of the One called *Ṣamad*; one might further consider that *Ṣamad* created—and therefore transcends—both time and space. Again, next, one may be moved to pause and meditate upon the inexhaustibly valuable jewel of God's name *Fard* (Single One).

While one can pause to consider the precious meanings of each divine perfection, the resonant rhyming of the three divine names within each verse may prompt the reader to also meditate upon the metaphysical relationship between the names—as in poetry, where concepts, aesthetics, and imagery are conveyed in ways that transcend the capacity of each single word. In the first verse we read: *Bika yá 'Alí, bika yá Vafí, bika yá Bahí, Anta'l-Káfí va Anta'sh-Shafí va Anta'l-Báqí ya Báqí.* In this verse the Arabic words used for Exalted One, Faithful One, and Glorious One rhyme with each other through the shared ending of -í, and also rhyme with the names of God in the repeating refrain, "Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing, Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One."[31] In this case, the literary, rhyming elements encourage the

31 The only other verse in which all six of the invoked names rhyme with each other is verse 28, which calls upon the three divine names *Sáqí*, *'Álí*, and *Ghálí*: Quencher of Thirsts, Transcendent Lord, Most Precious One. Otherwise, there are two distinct sets of rhymes in each verse; the first three names rhyme with each other and then the repeated refrain rhymes within itself.

worshipper to ask the metaphysical question: What is the intimate connection between God being Exalted and being Faithful, between being Glorious and being Sufficing? One might contemplate the nature of exaltation on the human plane, and consider that being a majestic king or an eagle soaring high in the clouds need not mean a cold detachment from the people and ecology of this planet, but can rather imply being a faithful friend and partner in mutual wellbeing. Likewise, with *'Alí* (Exalted)—also a Bahá'í title for 'Ali Muḥammad, the Báb—we are reminded of how He demonstrated genuine hospitality, such as when he received Mull*á* Ḥusayn-i-Bu<u>sh</u>rú'í on their first meeting. With *Bahí* (Glorious)—also alluding to Bahá'u'lláh—we are reminded of how He was known as "the Father of the Poor" in the 1840s, and of how 'Abdu'l-Bahá later exemplified a generous way of life among His neighbors in 'Akká and Haifa. In this way, the rhyme that unites these six divine names invites the reciter to consider the truths constituted through the interrelationships between all six, and thereby paints a rich, organic spectrum of the Divine Personality—one with equally organic implications for the socio-ethical, human realm.

In most succeeding verses, the three new attributes introduced in that verse rhyme with each other, encouraging further reflection on the metaphysical interrelationship between each new set of three divine names. For example, in the second verse that begins "I call on Thee O Sovereign, O Upraiser, O Judge," we find in Arabic the rhyming "*-án*": *Bika yá Sulṭán, bika yá Raf'án, bika yá Dayyán*. The rhyme elicits the question: how are Sovereign, Upraiser, and Judge interrelated? Personal meditation could yield any number of answers to the question, and any number of implications for our own lives. For example, one may consider that perhaps God is sovereign not only because of infinite power and possession but because that power is deployed to develop and elevate His creatures in ways that He has judged will be truly helpful. How might we use our own powers, possessions, and discernment to do similarly, on a human level? That the repeated refrain (*Káfí*, *<u>Sh</u>áfí*, and *Báqí*) also rhymes within itself may also prompt us to consider the relationship between these three attributes and the three new ones introduced: How can we use our powers to suffice, to heal, and to abide (which we might interpret as mindfully being with and accompanying each other)? Thus, in this interpretive metaphysics of unity and wholeness, we continue to apply reflection on the Divine Personality to the human ethical and social level.

Because each the three new names in each verse typically rhyme with each other, it stands out for the reciter when one of the names does not. Verse seven, "I call on Thee O Beloved One, O Cherished One, O Enraptured One," reads in Arabic *Bika yá Ma'<u>sh</u>úq, bika yá Maḥbúb, bika ya Majd<u>h</u>úb*.[32] The

32 Each of these names can be translated as a variation on romantic ideals of

consistent vowels (*a*, *ú*) and the alliterative, shared first syllable of each name (*ma-*) partially veil the lack of a perfect rhyme. Nonetheless, the first divine name still stands out to some degree, which may prompt the reciter of the prayer to prioritize meditating upon the name *Ma'sh*úq in itself and its relationship to the other two divine names in which loving includes cherishing and being enraptured.[33]

Another interesting case of a near rhyme is verse 10, which invokes a kind of interplay between God's names Spirit, Light, and Manifest One: *Bika yá Rúḥ, bika yá Núr, bika yá Ẓuhúr*. *Núr* and *Ẓuhúr* rhyme with each other, but not with *Rúḥ*. As in the above example, this lack of rhyme is mitigated by the shared long-vowel *-ú-*. Distinct from the above, however, here the rhyming aspect is also reinforced by the fact that one may quickly discern that *Rúḥ* backwards is *Ḥúr*, which does rhyme with the other two. If in the meditative recitation of the prayer, the reciter does take the path of thinking of both *Rúḥ* and *Ḥúr* then they may be reminded that in the Qur'án, the *Ḥúr* are the entities (usually translated as "black eyed damsels" or "virgins" or "fair ones") to whom the blessed believers are "married" in Qur'anic descriptions of the garden of heaven. In the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, these same *Ḥúr* or heavenly "maidens" are spiritualized as progressively revealed theophanies or personifications of God's attributes, truths, or the Holy Spirit itself.[34] Conceiving of the divine names as sentient theophanies in and of themselves reinforces our intent to meditate upon each of the divine names, both individually and in relationship to each other, in the Healing Prayer, and also reinforces conceiving the divine names as intimately present within or near our own soul.[35] A metaphysics of unity may also open us to consider the intimate relationship of the Bahá'í revelation with other holy books. For example, this set of divine names may also remind us of the act of Divine decree at the beginning of the Book of Genesis: "the wind" (*ruaḥ* in Hebrew, related to *rúḥ* in Arabic) of the Lord moves across

lover and beloved—*ma'sh*úq having to do with ardent, impassioned lover/beloved, *maḥbúb* having to do with a cherished sweetheart or darling and *majdh*úb with someone who is completely possessed or enraptured with love or attraction.

33 In verses 8 and 36 the first divine name, likewise, stands out by not truly rhyming with the second and third names.

34 See, for example, "How many the ḥúrís of inner meaning that are as yet concealed within the chambers of divine wisdom!" (Kitáb-i-Íqán 70) and "I have summoned the Maids (*ḥúríyát*) of Heaven to emerge from behind the veil . . . and have clothed them with these words of mine" (*Gleanings* 327). See also Hatcher, Hemmat, and Hemmat, "Bahá'u'lláh's Symbolic Use of the Veiled Ḥúríyyih."

35 By "within and near" is meant the Bahá'í understanding of both the ever-abiding divine Omnipresence with each soul as well as the human capacity to develop spiritual virtues. In this two-fold way, divine attributes may be thought of as "married" to the human soul.

the formless stuff of creation, while the command "Let there be light" (*'ówr* in Hebrew, related to *núr* in Arabic) revealed the distinctive shape God was giving creation.[36] The contemplation of this striking word, *Rúḥ*, that does not literally rhyme with the others is further facilitated by the fact that the following verse continues the *-úr* pattern of rhyme with *Ma'múr*, *Mashhúr*, and *Mastúr* (Thou Frequented by all, Thou Known to all, Thou Hidden from all). *Rúḥ* thus becomes the odd name out, directing the attention of the close reader to its relation to these other five names.

Some verses feature names that are differentiated by only a single phoneme, inviting meditation on the interrelationships between these divine names in particular. In verse 12, for example, only the middle phoneme *-l-* differentiates the second divine name from the first: "*Bika yá Ghá'ib, bika yá Ghálib, bika yá Wáhib* (I call on Thee O Concealed One, O Triumphant One, O Bestowing One)."[37] Thus, the reader of this invocation may think of a triumphant one as not necessarily being conspicuous, flamboyant, and imposing but, rather, "concealed" or quiet and humble, working effectively and generously in the background—a servant leader. Likewise, as the word *Ghá'ib* shares a root with the important Qur'anic concept of the *Ghayb* (Unseen) that in Islamic metaphysics encompasses such realities as the angels, the afterlife, and God Himself, and additionally—in Bahá'í scripture—the "Celestial Concourse," one gains confidence that such divine agents will subtly and graciously reinforce and inspire one's efforts to humbly strive to serve and sincerely obey God's teachings ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 12).[38]

A similar case is verse 35: "*Bika yá Wahháj, bika yá Balláj, bika yá Bahháj*," in which the third name differs by only one phoneme from each of the other two (***W**ahhaj*/***B**ahhaj* and *Ba**ll**aj*/*Ba**hh**aj*), reinforcing a conception of an intimate relationship between God as Enkindler, God as Brightener, and God as Bringer of Delight. Likewise, in verse 14's "*Bika yá Ṣáni', bika yá Qáni', bika yá Qáli'*" the first two divine names only differ by the first letter of each (*Ṣ-* vs. *Q-*), while the second

36 Genesis 1 also reminds us of the popular Islamic *ḥadíth qudsi*, "I was a Hidden Treasure and loved to be made known, so I created creation to be known"—a creation that discloses the attributes of the Creator.

37 The root verb *ghalaba* contains the overlapping meanings of "subduer" and "conqueror" (Wehr 796).

38 To my knowledge, there is no complete, official list in authoritative Bahá'í sources of who or what is included in the "Celestial Concourse." However, Bahá'ís will often refer to the Concourse as including heavenly angels, Prophets and Messengers of God, pure souls and saint-like beings who have passed on (including holy individuals and martyrs in the Bahá'í Faith and other religions), and mystical—perhaps symbolic—maidens (*ḥúr*). Bahá'í Scripture repeatedly promises their aid, as can be seen in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* 280, 334.

and third names only differ by the middle phoneme (i.e. *-n-* vs. *-l-*). The translation given for these three is Fashioner, Satisfier, and Uprooter. The reciter may be led to reflect on God as fashioning the creation in a way that satisfies both Himself and His created beings, including by satisfying the physical, intellectual, and spiritual needs of the human being. While it is probably not satisfying for a plant to be uprooted and destroyed by a storm, scavenger, or farmer, it *can* then become food for new plants or other creatures. Conversely, a plant may also be uprooted to be replanted in a new environment more suitable to continued growth and vitality, and sometimes we human beings find new opportunities for personal growth when placed in new settings. Also, religious teachings confirm some human desires and ask us to limit others; Buddhism, for example, reminds us in its Four Noble Truths that there is a close link between ignoble desires and suffering.[39] The reciter may draw strength from considering that their very Fashioner can also be the Uprooter of unworthy desires and cravings.

On three occasions, two of the three divine names share the same three-letter root, highlighting shades of significance in an underlying basic ideal. Thus, the divine names in verse 24, *Ma'ádh* (Shelter to all) and *Musta'ádh* (All-Preserving One), both from the Arabic root *'-ú-dh*, drive home and emphasize the sheltering and preserving nature of a refuge—maintaining and protecting the individual and family from material, psychological, and spiritual harm. Verse 25, meanwhile, begins with two words from the root *gh-ú-th*, *Ghayáth* (Thou Succorer of all) and *Mustagháth* (Thou invoked by all). Both are etymologically linked to the noun *Ghiyáth* (help, aid, succor) from the same root, but the nuances of meaning drawn out from their juxtaposition enrich the concept of help: together, they suggest a reality in which God succors all His creatures even before being asked, yet it is still beneficial for the creature to invoke Him, confident that the answer will be whatever succor is best. Verse 27 begins with "*Bika yá Ján*, *bika yá Jánán, bika yá 'Ímán*," which is translated into English as "O Thou my Soul, O Thou my Beloved, O Thou my Faith!" The Healing Prayer's play on the shared etymology of *Ján* and *Jánán* implies God being at the same time the very center of one's being and the best love of one's being—deepest subject and dearest object in an intimate dance within an I-Thou relationship. The reciter may also be prompted to such reflections on the relationships between *Ján* and *Jánán* by the fact that Bahá'u'lláh borrows *Jánán* from Persian, while

39 Similarly, in *Paris Talks* 'Abdu'l-Bahá was recorded to have said that suffering has various sources. It is often the natural consequence of our own unwise actions (50–51) or stems from our excessive attachment to the material world so as to encourage us to develop detachment (178); it can, additionally, result from the often random calamities of worldly conditions that teach us to rather dwell and rely upon the "spiritual Kingdom" of "perpetual joy" (110).

*-ján* (or *-jún*) is also commonly used in Persian as a popular suffix added affectionally to given names to say "dear one."[40] Each of these verses reinforces a metaphysics of unity in which God—the Sufficing, the Healing, the Abiding One—is intimately *with* His creation.

Verse 4 calls on "*Subḥán . . . Qudsán . . . Must'án*," encouraging meditation upon the connections between being Most Praised, Holy, and Helping. In reflecting upon the interrelationship between these qualities, one may come to consider that neither praiseworthiness nor holiness is at all about being vainglorously superior to others but is instead about being involved and engaged in helping others. Put differently, helping the wellbeing of oneself and others is a holy and praiseworthy act.

These are only a few examples to illustrate how the rhyming elements encourage the reciter to make metaphysical links between the various names of God and meditate on what they communicate about each other. The prayer, with its various sets of names in intimate dialogue, each name in itself inexhaustible in significance, in this way functions like a chandelier made of priceless, prism-like gems, each refracting its effulgent light to its fellow jewels, each illuminating new, multi-colored sparks in the others in a potentially infinite inter-illumination.

## Mystical Encounter in the Concluding Paragraphs

After beseeching, invoking, and meditating upon God by His many individual perfections in over forty verses, in the final paragraphs the worshipper entreats God in language that is deeply personal and majestic. Here, the prayer paints a picture of drawing near to, meeting, and communing with one's Lord, the visual counterpart of the feelings of mystical encounter which the preceding forty paragraphs may have already engendered.

> Sanctified art Thou, O my God! I beseech Thee by Thy generosity, whereby the portals of Thy bounty and grace were opened wide
> [The worshipper has been invited to walk through an internal doorway to her Lord and His gracious favors.]
>
> whereby the Temple of Thy Holiness was established upon the throne of eternity
> [The supplicant has entered the doorway to find herself in a magnificent, holy Temple near God's own throne.]

40 *Jánán*, also colloquially meaning "sweetheart," is frequently found in Bahá'u'lláh's Persian writings, such as the Persian Hidden Words nos. 1, 4, 12, 17, and 26. In this Tablet, this is the only direct borrowing from Persian I have identified. The first divine name in this verse *Ján* (life, spirit, soul) does sometimes show up in this connotation in Arabic. We should note that it is not uncommon for Bahá'u'lláh to use some Persian words in His Arabic writings— *jánán* itself or *siráj* (lamp), for instance. Likewise, the Qur'án has various old-Persian borrowings.

and by Thy mercy whereby Thou didst invite all created things unto the table of Thy bounties and bestowals
[The worshipper has been graciously invited to, and sits down at, the festal table inside the Temple and before God's throne.]

and by Thy grace whereby Thou didst respond, in thine own Self with Thy word "Yea!" on behalf of all in heaven and earth
[The supplicant and her Lord are engaged in intimate fellowship, and before she can even articulate her heart's deepest aspiration, without delay she receives an answer from her divine King of "Yes!"]

"at the hour when Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur stood revealed"
[From this table before the Lord's throne, His majesty, kingship, and awe-inspiring splendor is clearly made evident.]

"at the dawn-time when the might of Thy dominion was made manifest."
[The light of perception has dawned in the worshipper's inner eye, which perceives all parts of the world, the sky, the universe, the Unseen, the divine theophanies, and all human hearts as the Lord King's own personal possession.]

Then in the center and heart of the paragraph comes the line, "And again do I beseech Thee, by these most beauteous names, by these most noble and sublime attributes," in which God's names and attributes are reiterated as the pivot and central thresholds of access to mystical encounter and divine knowledge and raised to an aesthetic of beauty, magnificence, nobility, and sublimity. Yet this pivot point of the entire prayer is not the endpoint as the line continues in a rising crescendo that elevates the worshipper (in a kind of ladder of ascent or *mi'ráj*) to the Point that cannot be pointed to, immanent and transcendent at the same time: "and by Thy most Exalted Remembrance, and by Thy pure and spotless Beauty, and by Thy hidden Light in the most hidden pavilion, and by Thy Name, cloaked with the garment of affliction every morn and eve." How high is this "most Exalted Remembrance"? How pure and beautiful is His "pure and spotless Beauty"? At what depths is this "hidden Light"? This language, in my reading, challenges us to continually deepen and broaden our understanding of God's Being, shattering the shibboleths of previous ideas with more accurate ones, and then again shattering these new ideas in a never-ending cycle of growth.

## Miraculous Powers of This Tablet in Light of a Metaphysics of Unity

The promise in the final paragraphs of the Long Healing Prayer of seemingly miraculous powers to protect and heal might be understood in light of other

concepts in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation that break down and challenge present-day dichotomies and tensions between the traditional and the modern. Many intellectuals, especially in Europe and North America, consider medicine the exclusive province of science, while religion—if it has any function—is exclusively for the social, "spiritual," and possibly ethical and existential domains of life (Ernst 90; Arbab 185–86). The Bahá'í Faith, rejecting atomization, isolation, and separation, encourages a worldview that recognizes the deep interweaving, interdependence, interpenetration, and wholeness of the physical, psychological, and spiritual within an individual, in our social relationships, and in our connection with the earth itself. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "in the same way that the parts, members, and organs of the human body are interconnected, and that they mutually assist, reinforce, and influence each other, so too are the parts and members of this endless universe connected with, and spiritually and materially influenced by, one another" (*Some Answered Questions* 285). Likewise, Shoghi Effendi, in a letter written on his behalf, states:

> We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions. (qtd. in *Compilation* 84)

Just as each part of our body is deeply connected with every other part, we are inextricably connected with our environment, and all parts of the universe are materially and spiritually influenced by one another. For example, we know that the material, environmental conditions of air quality or potable water purity can have a great impact on human health. Likewise, as an example of the importance of social context to human physical health, a substantial body of research has identified positive outcomes for in-patients when family and friends are able to visit them in the hospital (Trogen). Although further empirical studies are needed, scientific research over the last thirty years has confirmed the strong positive impact of mind-body therapies (including relaxation, meditation, imagery, hypnosis, and biofeedback) on bodily function and symptoms pertaining to diverse conditions (Mahmoudi and Teckie 58; Bialkowska, Juranek, and Wojtkiewicz). Shoghi Effendi encouraged Bahá'ís seeking healing to both pray and work with competent physicians (qtd. in *Compilation* 476).[41] In His "Tablet to the Physician" (*Lawḥ-i-Ṭibb*), Bahá'u'lláh not only recommends well-proven or "established

41 "The prayers which were revealed to ask for healing apply both to physical and spiritual healing. Recite them, then, to heal both the soul and the body" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 161).

means" to heal, but also prayer, and states that the very presence of the physician filled with God's "Love"—bringing "mercy and hope"—heals the patient (Ziaei 74). Also, Bahá'u'lláh recommends care in diet, some exercise, and emotional wellness as (preventative) measures to promote wellbeing (Ziaei 76–78; Taherzadeh, vol. 3, 358). More generally, knowing that one's social relationships and physical environment tremendously impact one's state of being, the Bahá'í attempts to have a positive impact on social and ecological relationships in their homelife, neighborhood, community, workplace, and natural environment. In this metaphysics of unity, the greater the wellbeing of each, the more the others can flourish, and each must flourish if any entity is to actualize its potential to the fullest.

I offer that it is in this light of wholeness that we might read those final paragraphs of the Long Healing Prayer in which the supplicant beseeches God by His "generosity, whereby the portals of" His "bounty and grace were opened wide" and "by these most beauteous names to"

> protect [*taḥfiẓ*] the bearer [*ḥámil*] of this blessed Tablet, and whoso reciteth it, and whoso cometh upon it, and whoso passeth around the house wherein it is. Heal Thou, then, by it every sick, diseased and poor one, from every tribulation and distress, from every loathsome affliction and sorrow, and guide Thou by it whosoever desireth to enter upon the paths of Thy guidance, and the ways of Thy forgiveness and grace.

This passage may bring to mind the practice in many cultures influenced by Abrahamic traditions of writing prayers as talismans, physical artifacts that are believed to draw upon spiritual forces to heal and protect. However, a metaphysics of unity in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation modifies, deepens, and widens the significance of the talisman. In Merriam-Webster's definition, a talisman is "an object held to act as a charm to avert evil and bring good fortune." Some examples of talismans include: in Catholic folk traditions, the use of the crucifix, holy water, or the physical book of the Bible itself as agents of protection or healing; the *mezuzah* which adorns many Jewish homes; and shirts or pendants or necklaces (often called *ta'wíth*) adorned with or containing Qur'anic verses or holy names worn by some Muslims.[42] Such practices are not without controversy; religious leaders within these Abrahamic traditions have sometimes denounced the use of talismans altogether and, at other times, have reminded followers that the object itself does not have protective or healing power but is merely a symbol or reminder of God in whom one trusts as having all power to heal and protect (Collins 257–58, 275).

Bahá'u'lláh's Long Healing Prayer

42 Not all talismans have overtly religious origins; consider the American folk tradition of carrying a rabbit's foot for protection and good luck.

is similar in some ways to talismans of the Abrahamic traditions. Peter Smith noted the talismanic nature of the prayer's finale but does not discuss his reasoning for such a description (333–34). Fodor discusses a prayer containing similar language concerning its potential to cure and protect all, composed by a Muslim for a Christian woman: "O my God, I ask you by your name which you have preferred to all names to heal, cure and cleanse the bearer [*ḥámilah*] of this book . . . guard [*bi-ḥ'fiẓ*] this human body from all malice . . . from every evil and from the mischief and injury of all things created by God" (134).[43] Like some popular Islamic talismans that use the same approach of a consistent meter (for example: *fatáḥ*, *waháb*, *jabár*) to reinforce their potency and incantation-like character, even if they do not necessarily rhyme (Fodor 136), the Long Healing Prayer typically has a consistent cadence, as discussed above. Those steeped in such a background would notice these similarities to talismans and magical spells in this prayer, and this may be its main significance for those who do not believe it to also be the revealed Word of God.[44] Furthermore, central to theories of magical spells in Islamic and other religious milieus has been the necessity to call upon the actual names of the figures or spiritual forces one wishes to summon (Fodor 107–8, 110; Collins 253), and calling God by His actual names is the central motif of the Long Healing Prayer. Indeed, as discussed above, this prayer prominently invokes God by names that the Islamic tradition alludes to as God's "greatest name"—held to have miraculous powers, including that of healing—amongst them those names affirmed in the Bábí and Bahá'í revelations such as *Káfí* (Sufficing), *'Alí* (Exalted), and *Bahí* (a form of *Bahá*). Additionally, this prayer—like other talismans—ostensibly promises that its power can be accessed merely by possessing it, carrying it, or vocalizing it. It may be perfectly legitimate, within a metaphysics of unity, to understand these final paragraphs of the prayer as promising to transform health in these ways; God is the One who "doeth what He willeth" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 164). The Bahá'í openly "trusts" that the "All-Merciful Lord" can "heal a hundred thousand incurable ills" with a mere "glance," if He so pleases (ʻAbdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 51). However, from the language above, I would conclude that this trust in healing is primarily centered on God rather than on the mere possession of one of

43 Interestingly, this talisman healing prayer, like the Long Healing Prayer, begins by invoking the names of *Sháfí* [Healer] and *Káfí* [Sufficer]. However, Fodor does not disclose the date or location of composition of this prayer.

44 On the other hand, while for Bahá'ís the Long Healing Prayer—like each of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings—may share some cultural, religious, literary, or musical elements of other works of its social milieu, it is not a product of the Author's own cultural learnings but, rather, an act of direct Revelation from God. Its preeminent merits lie in its being the Word of God.

His prayers, even if the revealed prayer itself is very potent.

In various places in His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh makes reference to what have traditionally been regarded as magical objects in order to metaphorically illustrate the tremendous potency of God's revealed Word in developing and transforming the extraordinary potential of human beings. For example, an elixir (from the Arabic *al-iksír*) has been traditionally considered a medicinal mixture for specific diseases, while the elusive "elixir of life" was a cure-all that might also be able to confer eternal life upon its drinker; it was sometimes used interchangeably with the "philosopher's stone" that could convert copper into gold (Coudert and White, "Elixir"). In His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh metaphorically describes God's Revelation as the "Elixir" but states that its greatest "task" is not turning less valuable elements of matter into "purest gold," but reviving "the vitality of men's belief in God" and "converting satanic strength into heavenly power" (*Gleanings* 199)—that is, replacing human vices with virtues.[45] To consider the Long Healing Prayer as an instance of the "Elixir" of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, one that "converts satanic strength into heavenly power," is consistent with Islamic and Bahá'í teachings that a fundamental purpose of engaging the Divine Names is to improve and transform one's ethical character. Abú Ḥámid al-Ghazálí states that the perfection and happiness of the human consists in acquiring these divine attributes and "in this way man becomes 'lordly'—close to the Lord most high . . . and . . . a companion to the heavenly hosts of angels" (30, 32, 51–52). Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh asks rhetorically, "is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind . . . ?" (Kitáb-i-Íqan 240). And again:

> The purpose of the one true God in manifesting Himself is to summon all mankind to truthfulness and sincerity, to piety and trustworthiness, to resignation and submissiveness to the Will of God, to forbearance and kindliness, to uprightness and wisdom. His object is to array every man with the mantle of a saintly character, and to adorn him with the ornament of holy and goodly deeds. (*Gleanings* 298)

The worshipper is invited and attracted to become a mirror, ambassador, or channel—on a human level—of the very divine names meditated upon. In this way, not only is the Long Healing Prayer itself metaphorically an elixir or a talisman, but so too becomes the believer who prays with it and whose consciousness and ethical character are transformed by it. This goal of dynamic, relational transformation is then summarized in the last line of the prayer

45 Bahá'u'lláh also uses the term for His Teachings that provide the "infallible remedy for all the ills that afflict the children of men" (*Gleanings* 183), and this is how 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses it as well (*Selections* 59).

which recalls eight of the divine names emphasized previously in the prayer: the Powerful (*al-ʻAzíz*), the All-Sufficing (*al-Káfí*), the Healing (*ash-Shafí*), the Protector (*al-Ḥáfiẓ*), the Giving (*al-Muʻṭí*), the Compassionate (*ar-Raú'úf*), the All-Generous (*al-Karím*), the All-Merciful *(ar-Raḥím*).

It is the Elixir of God's Revelation that educates and empowers the "Talisman" of the human being to manifest wondrous, beneficial influences on society. Bahá'u'lláh says in the *Lawḥ-i-Maqsúd*, "Man is the supreme Talisman . . . Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom" (*Tablets* 161). This enormous power of the Revelation of God to develop the sublime capacities of the human being to contribute to the "betterment of the world" may sometimes be released instantaneously through sheer exposure to Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings. More often, this transformation occurs through the individual's systematic efforts, assisted by God's grace, to meditate upon and discover the "pearls of wisdom" in Bahá'u'lláh's Writings, to "translate that which hath been written into action" in their daily lives, and bring themselves "to account each day," reflecting upon their efforts, learning from them and from those of others, and improving day by day (*Gleanings* 184, 136, 250, 236) that "each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday" (*Tablets* 138).

Through these uses of terms such as "elixir" and "talisman" elsewhere in Bahá'u'lláh's writings, we might also understand the Long Healing Prayer's promise to protect not just the "bearer of this blessed Tablet, and whoso reciteth it," but "whoso cometh upon it and whoso passeth around the house wherein it is." Will this Tablet even protect the person who happens to walk by a house in which this prayer is kept? While His followers are confident in Bahá'u'lláh's promise that when someone recites God's verses "as intoned by them that have drawn nigh unto Him," "the scattering angels of the Almighty shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth, and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb" (qtd. in *Bahá'í Prayers* 3), they also know that they have the opportunity to take concrete actions: to develop friendships with their neighbors, be "worthy" of their "trust," be "charitable," and "look upon" them "with a bright and friendly face," manifesting "clearly the signs of the one true God" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 295, 278, 285, 316). As friendships, built on trust and kindness, are developed with neighbors—often in the context of coming together for meaningful conversations and prayer—they become partners as conscientious, intentional agents working for the wellbeing of the neighborhood and community, reflecting together on action, and consulting on each other's insights and wisdom in progressively improving systematic lines of action.[46] Complementary, then,

46 This is an attempt to briefly describe the global efforts of Bahá'ís to learn about frameworks of action for spiritual and social transformation on local levels.

to the essentially mystical dynamics of prayer, in this concrete, pragmatic, and systematic way the Long Healing Prayer becomes an elixir and talisman for the protection, healing, and guidance of not only individuals and families but entire neighborhoods.

I propose, in short, that those deeply engaged—in thought, attitude, word, and practical action—with the concepts and truths of the Long Healing Prayer can catalyze protective, healing, and guiding influences in their natural and social environment. In other words, in this metaphysics of unity, the human being's way of life—in collaborative teamwork with others—becomes integrated into, and integral to, those various spiritual forces at work to bring good to the world. This helps us make sense of the language that follows, listing typologies of ailments ("from every tribulation and distress, from every loathsome affliction and sorrow"), as highlighting the Tablet's aim to heal not only illnesses that are biological in nature but also those that are psychological, emotional, existential, economic, political, social, ecological, or ethical.

## Conclusion

The metaphysics of unity and wholeness offered by the Long Healing Prayer invites a transformation in our perception, whereby the diverse phenomena of life will be related to their truest Source and Reality in the Divine Names. For example, washing one's face in the morning, one may be reminded of God's Name "Sanctified One" (*Nuzzúh*). In a blade of grass shooting up from the ground or a basketball player giving a fallen competitor a hand to get back up, one may see an "Upraiser" (*Raf'án*). Listening to an engaging lecture or witnessing a gorgeously choreographed dance, one may recall God's Name "O Captivating One" (*Jadhíb*). Thinking through how to write this paragraph, I may be reminded of God's Names "the Knower," "the Wise," "Thou Who penetratest all things," or "Lord of Utterance." While its list of divine perfections is not exhaustive, the Long Healing Prayer provides a deep and wide spectrum of Divine Names through which the lover of God's beauty may perceive traces of the Best Beloved everywhere.

The wholeness achieved through supplication, worship, and meditation upon these divine Names of the Healing Prayer, culminating in the finale's metaphorically rich journey of ascent towards the Majestic King, is one that includes heavenly realities as expressions of God's own Countenance. Another momentous prayer, the Long Obligatory Prayer, "invested by Bahá'u'lláh with a special potency and significance," begins with the address "O Thou Who art the Lord of all names and the Maker of the heavens."

As an example of guidance for such frameworks of action, see pages 7–8 of the letter of the Universal House of Justice to the Continental Board of Counsellors, dated 29 December 2015. Also, see Jalalizadeh, 90–91.

(*Bahá'í Prayers* 8).[47] In a kind of play on words, the Arabic as spoken *Yá Illaha'l-Asmá'i wa Fáṭira's-samá'i* creates a close link between "names" (*Asmá'i*) and "heavens" (*samá'i*) in which the divine names may be experienced as portals of the heaven of the Divine Reality. Thus, contemplating "the Lord of all names" can lead to consciousness, not only of the intimate relationships between the perfections of the One and those conferred upon His many creations on earth, but also of the intimate relationship between heaven and earth. With the human being defined in the Bahá'í Writings as the focal point of the "radiance of all [God's] names and attributes" (*Gleanings* 65), we learn more about such names through the Long Healing Prayer. This healing prayer cultivates our understanding of those spiritual names, and in correspondence to the measure we fulfill our human purpose to actualize these names—individually and in partnership with others—the earth itself becomes in tangible ways "heaven on earth."

In the *Lawḥ-i-Anta'l-Káfí* Bahá'u'lláh engages in creative ways with Arabic poetical forms, Islamic literature, prayer, and *dhikr* that may be familiar to someone with a Muslim background, while—when read with a metaphysics of unity in mind—the Tablet refashions our conception of talismans, elixirs, and mysticism to embrace theological, social, ethical, and ecological dimensions. As the prayer enumerates God's names with a completeness reminiscent of the Islamic *ḥadíth* of God's ninety-nine names, each one a distinguishing characteristic of the One, a dynamic, high-definition picture of the spectrum of the Divine Personality is painted in the heart of the person praying. This Divinity is at once transcendent and intimately connected with self, others, unseen spiritual realities, and one's natural and social ecology, and it calls one to dignifying and unifying relationships with each. In this evolving awareness of a metaphysics of unity, health is nurtured as one continually grows—in a journey that knows no bounds—in perceiving and experiencing the wholeness of the self as whole with the whole, single organism of existence, fashioned and cared for by its Creator and Lord—the all-sufficing Whole itself.

47 This Obligatory Prayer is called "Long" as Bahá'u'lláh also revealed a "Medium" and a "Short" Obligatory Prayer.

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In loving memory, we repropose in this issue a poem previously published by ABS.

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