

“I Know Not How to Sing Thy Praise” Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá’u’lláh

Wolfgang Klebel

This prayer by Bahá’u’lláh¹ gives access to the basic question of theology about “God” for this day and age, in which practical and theoretical atheism and irreligion have captured at least half of mankind, not only in the East but also in the West. It presents an answer to the question how to believe in God today and how to understand words like the following in another prayer by Bahá’u’lláh: “*O Thou Who art the most manifest of the manifest and the most hidden of the hidden!*” (PM 248)

In these reflections the four modes of Revelation described by the Báb are used to understand the theological location of the many prayers of the Bahá’í Manifestations. According to the Báb, prayer is the second mode of Revelation after the Verses of God. Here the language of revelation is uttered in the voice of the Prophet Who now speaks in the station of the creation, addressing the Creator with an attitude of servitude and effacement (an affirmation of “Thou art God”)².

The other two modes of revelation are commentaries and scientific educational discourse. Theological inquiry can benefit from this distinction insofar as the prayers of Bahá’u’lláh are a valid source of theological information, giving the Bahá’í theology a special advantage in the sense of Hans Urs von Balthazar’s distinction between “kneeling” and “sitting” theology.³ This distinction between the two modes of theology refers to a theology in its connection to contemplative prayer, on the one hand, and to a theology as scientific and educational understanding of the Revelation, on the other. This

distinction can benefit the student of theology and clarify issues, previously not clear.

The reflections on this prayer of Bahá'u'lláh brings a number of important questions to light. What is the difference between not knowing how to praise and describe God in the Bahá'í Faith, and the denial of the existence of God in atheism? What is the relation of the Manifestation to God? Consequently, how do these questions affect religion in today's world? What is the meaning of modern atheism and agnosticism and in what way has the understanding of God changed during the last centuries? Does theology today have to be a "post-atheistic" theology and has any previous theology become inadequate? What is the theological position of the praying person and what is prayer and what is it not? What should we pray for and what is the effect of prayer?

According to the Bahá'í principle of progressive revelation, every revelation responds to the needs of the time; every revelation abolishes, conserves, and expands the previous revelations. Therefore, trying to find new theological insights from Bahá'í prayers is a legitimate scholarly task and this paper attempts to serve as an example of this process. Consequently, Bahá'í theology can legitimately be called progressive theology as it documents the progress of understanding the Bahá'í Revelation throughout the time given to this Revelation.

These reflections have a personal aspect. Bahá'í prayers are used by the faithful as private prayers. It appears to be the first time in the history of religion, that the prayers of the Manifestation are used by the faithful in this personal way. The following reflections helped the writer and, hopefully, will help the reader to improve their devotional life and to understand what is expressed when reciting or chanting Bahá'í prayers. Any theological inquiry needs to be applicable in the life of the faithful; otherwise, *"such academic pursuits as begin and end in words alone have never been and will never be of any worth."* (TB 169)

Let us now turn to Bahá'u'lláh's prayer which is divided into four paragraphs. The first describes the Not-knowing of how to sing God's praise, how to describe God's glory and how to call God's name. In this paragraph, it is emphasized that no creature can do this. This impotence is extended to the issue of praising God's essential oneness, which is included in this declaration of impotence, of Not-Knowing. Any attempt to do this is described as vain imagination.

In the second paragraph the impossibility of knowing God is again pointed out, but then the mercy of God is depicted, which allows the servant to praise God. It presents a colorful picture of this praise. Further, it is noted that this praise will result in the believers attaining what God has destined for them through divine will and purpose.

In the third paragraph, the total impotence of all created beings, even of the Manifestations to praise God, is again declared. Following this, it is explained that it is God—the all Powerful and Supreme Ruler—Who draws the believer towards Him.

In the last paragraph this relationship between God and the human person is again the topic and it is emphasized the personal characteristics necessary to appeal to God's mercy and grace. Moreover, it is again pointed out that God is the cause of the prayer, which allows the servant to reach the heights to which he aspires. The closure of the prayer again lauds God's forgiving mercy and bountiful gift.

Bahá'u'lláh's Prayer

All-praise be to Thee, O Lord, my God! I know not how to sing Thy praise, how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name. If I call upon Thee by Thy Name, the All-Possessing, I am compelled to recognize that He Who holdeth in His hand the immediate destinies of all created things is but a vassal

dependent upon Thee, and is the creation of but a word proceeding from Thy mouth. And if I proclaim Thee by the name of Him Who is the All-Compelling, I readily discover that He is but a suppliant fallen upon the dust, awe-stricken by Thy dreadful might, Thy sovereignty and power. And if I attempt to describe Thee by glorifying the oneness of Thy Being, I soon realize that such a conception is but a notion which mine own fancy hath woven, and that Thou hast ever been immeasurably exalted above the vain imaginations which the hearts of men have devised.

The glory of Thy might beareth me witness! Whoso claimeth to have known Thee hath, by virtue of such a claim, testified to his own ignorance; and whoso believeth himself to have attained unto Thee, all the atoms of the earth would attest his powerlessness and proclaim his failure. Thou hast, however, by virtue of Thy mercy that hath surpassed the kingdoms of earth and heaven, deigned to accept from Thy servants the laud and honor they pay to Thine own exalted Self, and hast bidden them celebrate Thy glory, that the ensigns of Thy guidance may be unfurled in Thy cities and the tokens of Thy mercy be spread abroad among Thy nations, and that each and all may be enabled to attain unto that which Thou hast destined for them by Thy decree, and ordained unto them through Thine irrevocable will and purpose.

Having testified, therefore, unto mine own impotence and the impotence of Thy servants, I beseech Thee, by the brightness of the light of Thy beauty, not to refuse Thy creatures attainment to the shores of Thy most holy ocean. Draw them, then, O my God, through the Divine sweetness of Thy melodies, towards the throne of Thy glory and the seat of Thine eternal holiness. Thou art, verily, the Most Powerful, the Supreme Ruler, the Great Giver, the Most Exalted, the Ever-Desired.

Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Grant, then, O my God, that Thy servant who hath turned towards Thee, hath fixed his gaze upon Thee, and clung to the cord of Thy mercifulness and favor, may be enabled to partake of the living waters of Thy mercy and grace. Cause him, then, to ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth, and withhold him not from that which Thou dost possess. Thou art, verily, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Bountiful (PM 122–124).

Here follows the commentary sentence by sentence, interrupted by personal reflections and theological comments.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

All-praise be to Thee, O Lord, my God!

Personal Reflection

This prayer starts with an invocation of God in which the approach to God is a personal and direct address: “O Lord, my God.” This is a conventional way of addressing God, common to the religions of the past. There is no doubt expressed to whom this prayer is directed, no doubt that it articulates the dependent existence of the supplicant and no doubt that all praise and glory belongs to Him, who is addressed in this first sentence as the Lord of life, the God of creation. After this conventional introduction that places the prayer in the spiritual sphere of openness to God, we come to the surprising claim that the believer, who comes to His Lord, does not know how to do what he is attempting to do.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

I know not how to sing Thy praise, how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name.

Personal Reflection

This sentence contains the main topic of the first part of the prayer. The three basic affirmations that are included in prayers of all religions

are mentioned and we are asked to admit that we “know not” how to articulate them. In other words, we do not know how to pray, how to raise our voice to God and sing His praise, how to give Him Glory and even how to call His Name. It is as if we do not know any more how to say even the Lord’s Prayer to “Our Father in Heaven.” This is the first statement and the most ominous declaration of this prayer, i.e. to have to admit that we “know not” how to pray.

It appears that after the suppliant has addressed God in the conventional manner of all religions, he stops and confesses an impotence and inability to go farther. I “know not,” I am incapable, I am helpless and I am not even able to ask for help to pray. “I know not how to call upon Thy Name.”

One of the roots of modern atheism is this “not knowing,” this agnosticism, this helplessness in the face of modern science and all the tragedies, evils and catastrophes of life. We do not know any more how to call to God, how to pray to Him and how to mention His Name. This is illustrated by a Jewish friend who lost her faith when her entire family perished in Nazi concentration camps. Even though she calls herself agnostic, she has even stated that she wished she could believe. In other words, she is one of those who no longer know how to call God’s name.

Another reason why we “know not to pray” is modern science. The knowledge of science has removed the naïve childlike ability to trust and believe in God, to accept Our Father in Heaven and to give Him glory and honor. We do not know any more to whom to direct our prayer; the God of the old religions has ceased to exist for many of us. Even many apparently religious people are really agnostics in the sense that they do not know any more how to address the God in Whom they claim to believe. Instead, they may cling to the God of their childhood, when they heard the story of Moses and

of Jesus, Mohammed, or the Buddha and when they still knew to Whom to pray.

Yet, when we go to work, when we live the modern life with all its technology and electronic equipment, do we really believe in God and pray to him in that old fashioned way? Can we? Do we thank Him for all the modern technological achievements, or is He no longer in the picture of our practical life.

Hence, it is not only the unbeliever, who was raised in atheistic Russia or China, it is not only the capitalist, whose God is money—it is everybody, who “knows not” how to praise God and sing His glory. The world today has lost its religious aura. God has been removed from this world and He seems to have lost out.⁴ Growing numbers of people wonder “who needs Him anyway?”

Bahá'u'lláh identifies the place where the paths of believers and non-believers part: the *“dwellers of the city of self... adorning their heads and their bodies with the emblem of knowledge, have proudly rejected Thee and turned away from Thy beauty.”* (PM 77). It is clear that it is not the difficulty to know God, not the honest question about God's existence that has been raised in the last centuries, which Bahá'u'lláh deplors, rather, it is the selfishness of man, the self-centeredness of the *“dwellers of the city of self”* that creates this rejection of God's message. Additionally, it is the pride in their knowledge that prevents them from recognizing the truth of creation and turn away from Him.

To confess with Bahá'u'lláh in a prayer to God that we know not how to pray is the total opposite from the modern man who, in all his knowledge, proudly claims, yes, we do know that there is no God and we can prove scientifically that God does not exist.

While the acceptance of God's plan for man was always a challenge and was always open to rejection, now it is not only the message that is questioned, it is the One who sends the message, Whose existence is questioned. Is there a God or not is the question of our time. The two thousand year quest of Christianity to define God and religion and the numerous different ways of doing so has created this great insecurity about God's existence. Forcefully and belligerently pitting one way of defending religion against another has led to war and discord among the believers of the Messenger of love, and unity.

Theological Comment: Modern Atheism

Karl Marx (1818–1883), the most influential of modern atheists, was not unfamiliar with the religious and philosophical issues of his time. His formulation of the question of God's existence for the 19th Century, assumed the authority of science and philosophy. It found dedicated believers all over the world, in spite of the fact that all his "scientific" predictions failed to materialize. In his early writings in 1844, Karl Marx made the following fundamental announcement: "The foundation of irreligious criticism is this: man makes religion, religion does not make man."⁵ Man makes God, not God makes man.

Teilhard de Chardin's answers to this question present an unexpected view from which the solution needs to come. He understands Marx's point about man making God but answers it rather ingeniously through his new understanding of evolution and creation. Teilhard states "Properly speaking, God does not make: He makes things make themselves"⁶

One could follow Marx's statement about man making God to its logical conclusion and say that the problem is exactly this belief that "Man makes religion", because any man-made religion is restricting the conception of God as Bahá'u'lláh revealed:

Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Some, deluded by their idle fancies, have conceived all created things as associates and partners of God, and imagined themselves to be the exponents of His unity. By Him Who is the one true God! Such men have been, and will continue to remain, the victims of blind imitation, and are to be numbered with them that have restricted and limited the conception of God (GWB 166).

This verse clearly states that any attempt to draw God down into the world, which happens in pantheism and in all attempts to try “to know God” in theism, leads consequently to atheism, because it restricts and limits the conception of God.

Marx's statements were not new but followed the tradition of the French Enlightenment⁷ and of the German Hegelian philosophical school of thought.⁸ This atheistic and irreligious ideology in Communism and in a similar attempt in National Socialism led to all the horrendous consequences of a world without or against God, and caused one tenth of humankind to perish in wars, persecution, torture and terror. The numbers of people killed, starved or worked to death, or condemned to die during the last century is about 100 million.⁹ The defenders of atheism never seem to even consider this historical fact.

Modern atheism has been called postulatory,¹⁰ indicating that the non-existence of God has to be postulated in order to preserve the dignity of the human condition and the freedom of man. Karl Marx intended to free man from the shackles of the religion and politics of his time and anticipated a time in the future when the “free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”.¹¹ None of these developments ever took place where Marx's ideology was applied.

During the last two thousand years of Christianity, the existence of God was never really in question, even though our understanding of God has changed over time. In her book, “The History of God”,

Karen Armstrong describes the development of the understanding of God in the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Her last chapter “Does God have a Future?” ends with the statement: “Human beings cannot endure emptiness and desolation; they will fill the vacuum by creating a new focus of meaning. The idols of fundamentalism are not good substitutes for God; if we are to create a vibrant new faith for the twenty-first century, we should, perhaps, ponder the history of God for some lessons and warnings.”¹²

In spite of her theologically and historically excellent analysis and her well-founded warnings about the history of religion, Karen Armstrong—in this writer’s opinion—misses the point here. Human beings cannot fill the vacuum, especially after they declared the death of God and they cannot re-create a new faith. Her statement is yet another expression of a modern woman, who wishes she could believe, but who “knows not how.”

When teaching Bahá’u’lláh’s message, we need to be cognizant of the fact that knowing God in the old way does not create a requirement for the acceptance of the Faith. It is rather the presumptuous attitude that we could and do know, that it is up to the human selfish intellect to decide whether God exists, which makes the acceptance of God’s message for our time so difficult for so many. Re-reading Bahá’u’lláh’s description of the true seeker might help us to understand the requirements of teaching and seeking. There the seeker is admonished that “*he must, before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge*” (GWB 246 passim).¹³ If we understand our Faith correctly, it should be no more difficult to teach an atheist or agnostic, than an adherent of the previous religions and their Messengers. The reason is clear: we are not arguing about God per se, but about deficient human conceptions of God.

Theological Comment: Apophatic Theology

It seems that any attempt “to know God” in human terms will necessarily conclude with a picture of God that reasonable thinking people today find unacceptable. That is the meaning of the famous declaration of Nietzsche about the death of God, i.e., any God, we could ever know is dead, we have killed this God.

It needs to be noted here that not-knowing God, that the fact we cannot know who God is has a long tradition in theology and is described under the term Apophatic Theology. Stephen Lambden in his paper “The Background and Centrality of Apophatic Theology in Bábí and Bahá'í Scripture” states:

The following paper will attempt to trace aspects of the history of the theological position of the incomprehensibility-unknowability of God in past major Abrahamic religions and to highlight its importance and significance for contemporary Bahá'ís.¹⁴

After describing the history of this concept in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion (especially as expressed in the Shiite tradition), Lambden describes how this Apophatic Theology pervades all of Bahá'í Scripture. God cannot be known by His creatures, all what we know is the Revelation given us through His messengers, the Manifestations. Lambden's conclusion is:

Apophasis as unknowing can be experienced by the Bahá'í who seeks the God whose door is ever closed though ever open. Through the Manifestation of God the door to divine knowledge is eternally open. Yet mystical bewilderment before the Divine is an experience of unknowing: “*To merit the madness of love, man must abound in sanity*”. To approach

the All-Knowing human beings must be full of the ecstasy of unknowing; spiritual excitement before the Ultimate Deity.

Bahá'u'lláh in this prayer will lead to the understanding that the confession of not-knowing is the presupposition of knowing God and praising him. It is God Who in his mercy and through His manifestations has opened up the way for humans to praise God, as will be shown in the commentary below.

In this context, it is necessary to ask, “What is the relationship between modern atheism and apophatic theology?” In other words what is the difference between apophatic theology and postulatory atheism, which thinks it has negated God’s existence in order to allow man to be free and himself? What is the distinction between postulatory atheism and an apophatic theology which teaches that man knows not how to praise God and how to describe God’s glory and how to call upon God? Deciding between the two appears to be the same decision which is described in the book of Genesis when the serpent told Eve that in not serving God and not following His commands, man shall *be as gods, knowing good and evil*.

*And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die:
For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes
shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.
(Genesis 3:4–5)*

In fact, Adam and Eve did die, did lose the paradise and were expelled into a life that ends in death. Translating this primitive picture into our time, one could say that the same happened during the last century; atheism, instead of making man free and bringing the paradise-like new changes to earth, brought nothing but death, war and misery encompassing most of this earth. The new man, as postulated by Marx, who had celebrated the death of God and had declared the end of religion, is declaring a new “religion of atheism”—better called

“irreligion,”—yet, he did not become *as gods*, did not know all (*good and evil*), but ended up in war and destruction of human life and civilization. As Bahá'u'lláh stated: *the dust of irreligion hath enwrapped all men* (SLH 67). His interpreter Shoghi Effendi has explicated this, describing state atheism as irreligion in the last century:

From Soviet Russia a definitely anti-religious Communism is pushing west into Europe and America, East into Persia, India, China and Japan. It is an economic theory, definitely harnessed to disbelief in God. It is a religious irreligion... (WOB 1181)

And he has described it as a worldwide phenomenon, which is affecting the Western world as well, weakening the moral fiber of civilization even today:

In these days when the forces of irreligion are weakening the moral fiber, and undermining the foundations of individual morality, the obligation of chastity and holiness must claim an increasing share of the attention of the American believers, both in their individual capacities and as the responsible custodians of the interests of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh. (ADJ 29)

It is the not-knowing of God that opens up the real knowledge of God, it is the apophatic theology, the theology that admits that we cannot know God, and it is the conviction that we have to give up all attempts to know God that is the presupposition of any real knowing of God. This attitude of impotence and accepted limitation, this acceptance of being created, is required, before we can know God. This was expressed by the Báb in these words:

I have known Thee by Thy making known unto me that Thou art unknowable to anyone save Thyself. (SWB196)

In the tradition of apophatic theology, a similar statement was made in the last century by the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886–1929), who stated

Of God we know nothing. Yet, this Not-Knowing is the Not-Knowing of God, as such, this is the beginning of our Knowing of Him.¹⁵

In the biblical thinking, which is not concerned about the essence of God, but is mainly talking about God's wisdom for this world, the fact that we cannot know God was expressed in terms of God's providence for man. Paul in Romans 11:33–35 expressed this in these words:

O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

If I call upon Thee by Thy Name, the All-Possessing, I am compelled to recognize that He Who holdeth in His hand the immediate destinies of all created things is but a vassal dependent upon Thee, and is the creation of but a word proceeding from Thy mouth

Personal Reflection

At the first reading of that prayer, I was shocked; I could not believe it and tried to interpret the following statement in any other possible way. Yet, what is said here leaves no doubt: this “not knowing” is attributed to all humans, even to the Manifestations of God.

This is the situation of the world today, where at least one third of humankind has been educated to ridicule and reject the mere idea

of God. The other two thirds have a tainted picture of what religion is. Bahá'u'lláh in this prayer does not apologize for this situation or helplessly deplore it, nor does He try to go back to the old security of knowing. He does not even try to dispute it; on the contrary, He carries the “not knowing,” of which He speaks much farther and gives it its proper place in the understanding of God. Furthermore, He includes Himself in this “not knowing.” He acknowledges this fact of “not knowing.” His understanding of God, which culminates in His and everybody else’s “not knowing” becomes a guiding light for modern man and the basis of a theology of the future.

Here Bahá'u'lláh speaks not only of you and of me, of women and man, of believers and unbelievers. Instead, he explicitly speaks of Himself; of Him, “*Who holdeth in His hand the immediate destinies of all created things.*”¹⁶ Without any doubt, He includes in this “I know not” the Manifestations of God.

Theological Comment: Manifestation of God

In these words, Bahá'u'lláh describes the Manifestation as “the creation of but a word proceeding from Thy mouth.” With this statement, He reminds us of the Prolog to the Gospel of John (1:1–3) speaking about Christ as the Word of God, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that was made.*”

What the gospel describes in a static and historical way as happening “in the beginning,” Bahá'u'lláh brings into the present and affirms that the Manifestation holds the immediate destiny of all created things in His hand: Here and now and in reality¹⁷. Given this divine power, one would expect that the Manifestations at least know God; that They for sure know how to sing His praise, describe His glory, and

call to Him upon His Name. Yet, Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that they are nothing but dependent vassals of God and created by His word. Even they participate in the “know-not” of all creation. That fact alone should give us an indication that this not-knowing is not merely a rhetorical phrase but an ontological statement, a statement that tells us something about the reality of being, i.e., of all created being.

Before God, even the Manifestation is nothing in itself, and knows nothing, except the Will of God. This understanding explains much better the agony of Christ before His crucifixion (Mathew: 36–42) than the theory of the Trinity.¹⁸ On the other hand, in relation to humankind, the Manifestation holds the immediate destiny of all created things in His hand.¹⁹ This view of God puts God at two removes from us. Looking at the Manifestation of God—Who is the destiny of the world—we have to recognize that God is absolutely supreme above all created things and that there is no path of understanding and knowing that leads from our created existence to Him. Especially the attempts by “*dwellers of the city of self*” (PM 77) cannot ever reach this height and even the faithful and believers in the message from God have first to confess that they “*know not*”, before the understanding of God can become open to them. The only way to God is in the other direction, from God to humanity through the Manifestation.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

And if I proclaim Thee by the name of Him Who is the All-Compelling, I readily discover that He is but a suppliant fallen upon the dust, awe-stricken by Thy dreadful might, Thy sovereignty and power.

Personal Reflection

Therefore, Bahá'u'lláh applies the same principle of I-know-not to every human being, and even to the Divine Messenger, Who, like

us, is but a suppliant, a beggar, in the dust and awe-stricken by God's might, sovereignty and power. Again, it is not the knowing, the theology, the science of the Divine, or any other sciences that allows access to God, because we "know not."

This fact has become clear during the last centuries. The more the familiar picture of the Father in Heaven faded away in the light of modern science; the more the concept of God became distant. Consequently, thinking people lost their faith in such a God. The Churches did not make this process easier. Their insistence in the old understanding and their condemnation of science and modern thought pushed many people into the denial of God²⁰.

What Bahá'u'lláh asserts in this prayer is the opposite. God, in His eyes is not becoming smaller and fading away, rather He becomes the All-Compelling, to Whom a suppliant falls in the dust. Therefore, the know-not statement here is not a statement about God, but a statement about the futile human effort to understand God, to grasp the essence of God, or as one could say, to make a God in the image of man. It is the issue of idolatry and only the acknowledgment of God as the total Otherness and unknowable Essence can save man from at first making his own God and then, in an attempt of being honest, throwing this graven image out and proclaiming the death of God. This process is the topic in A. N. Wilson's book: *God's Funeral*, who describes the history of European atheism and modernism from Hume to Pius XI, quoting on the last page of his book Tyrrell, who stated in 1906: "One has to pass through atheism to faith; the old God must be pulverized and forgotten before the new can reveal himself to us."²¹.

Theological Comment: Theodicy

The question of the justification of the physical and moral evil in the creation of a good God must be raised here.²² This question, why evil exists in the world cannot be solved with a God, who is made in the image of man in an unchanging world. The belief in the “Father in Heaven”, which was easily understandable two thousand years ago, cannot simply be ‘translated’ into our modern world²³. How can we explain physical and especially moral evil, where the innocent are tortured, where children are abused, or die of painful diseases?

The first answer is the answer of Job. It is not for us to understand and judge: God, the All-Compelling, is greater than our imagination, so how can we understand His plans and the place of evil in the world. Yet, this answer is not satisfactory for modern reasoning. Another, more contemporary understanding of this question is to see God as the God of Evolution.²⁴ Only this view of the world as it really has evolved will make us somehow understand, what the meaning of evil in the world might be.

Evil is the price of evolution and the rebellion against this process played out in the progression of man and the world. The final answer, given to us, is the answer of the cross, of the suffering of the Messengers sent by God, indicating that the progressive revelation of God does lead to the ever-advancing civilization, but not without pain and suffering. We need to understand that the shadow of this progress is the evil, which is part of this developing, progressive world. This is expressed in another prayer of Bahá'u'lláh:

*Had not every tribulation been made the bearer of Thy wisdom,
and every ordeal the vehicle of Thy providence, no one would
have dared oppose us, though the powers of earth and heaven
were to be leagued against us (PM 14)*

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

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

Personal Reflection

Here Bahá'u'lláh tells us that even the highest attributes we can give God are not reaching into His inaccessible essence. Even if we call God the One and we praise the Unity of God, we are only talking about a human concept, we only attempt to attribute to God something of our world; we again make our own God. As legitimate as this expression might seem, and as frequently as it is used in the Bahá'í Writings, seen in this context of human knowing, Bahá'u'lláh calls it a vain imagination designed in the hearts of man. We cannot know, we cannot praise, and we cannot call to God because we only put our imagination to work whenever we pretend to know to whom we speak.

What is required of the true seeker (GWB 264–265) is the abandonment of all his knowledge and even his wish to know and letting himself fall into the hands of God. This is the mystical aspect of faith and prayer, which, as of yet, we Bahá'ís in America have hardly touched in our devotions. To accept that even the highest expression we can make about God is nothing but a vain imagination, is difficult; it requires a detachment and purity of heart that is not easily acquired or reached fully in this world. It is with a sense of loss of our own pride in our thinking and knowing, it is with a sense of an all-embracing dedication that we can only come near to this aspiration of finding God. The purity of heart and of life, as Shoghi Effendi (ADJ 46–55) has stressed, is a precondition of recognizing this reality. The deepest expression of this truth is expressed in the mystical writings of Bahá'u'lláh, where he speaks of the lover seeking the beloved everywhere, even in the dust:

One must judge of search by the standard of the Majnun of Love.

It is related that one day they came upon Majnun sifting the dust, and his tears flowing down. They said, "What doest thou?" He said, "I seek for Layli." They cried, "Alas for thee! Layli is of pure spirit, and thou seekest her in the dust!" He said, "I seek her everywhere; haply somewhere I shall find her."

Yea, although to the wise it be shameful to seek the Lord of Lords in the dust, yet this betokeneth intense ardor in searching. "Whoso seeketh out a thing with zeal shall find it."

The true seeker hunteth naught but the object of his quest, and the lover hath no desire save union with his beloved. Nor shall the seeker reach his goal unless he sacrifice all things (SVFV 6–8).

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

The glory of Thy might beareth me witness!

Personal Reflection

Bahá'u'lláh returns to the beginning in this new paragraph of the prayer. While there, He addresses God by giving Him glory and praise; he calls on God to witness the fact that we know not and can never know.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Whoso claimeth to have known Thee hath, by virtue of such a claim, testified to his own ignorance; and whoso believeth himself to have attained unto Thee, all the atoms of the earth would attest his powerlessness and proclaim his failure.

Personal Reflection

There is no claim to know God. What was stated before is reiterated from a different point of view. Before the inability and helplessness,

the nothingness of the creature in front of God was expressed in the prayer; now the pride of man who claims to know is declared as total ignorance. Again, there is no way to attain God, to reach to Him, to build an intellectual tower of Babel high enough to reach to God. The whole creation will attest the failure of such an attempt. Any attempt to do so, to build a society based on atheism will lead to destruction and terrorism, because of it being contrary to human nature and contrary to reality. All the atoms of the earth indicate that even human sciences dealing with the atoms of the world cannot attain knowledge of God. They can indicate, and this is remarkable, that the old picture of God as a static, defined and definable entity is wrong, and cannot be sustained²⁵. They only can open some new venues to approach God through His Messengers.

Theological Comment: Hierarchical Religions

When praying to God, when approaching Him, there is never a human claim; there is never an institution that has a special privilege, a special power in the sight of God. Bahá'u'lláh's abolition of priesthood and church is clearly implied in this statement. Nobody, not even the Manifestation can claim to know God. Therefore, nobody can speak in the name of God, except He, Who speaks the "Word of God" as revealed to Him.

The meaning of the Revelation and of the Manifestations of God is expressed in the Bahá'í Writings, but it is not easy to understand it fully. We might recall that Jesus said (John 14:10): "*The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does the works.*" The messages of all the Manifestations must be understood this way; they speak not from their human nature and knowledge, no matter how stainless and perfect their humanity is. They are only a conduit bringing the message from God; they are the mirrors of God's Spirit. They never claim to have power

or authority over God's message or to be able to reach God through their human knowledge.²⁶

At this point the prayer changes without starting a new section. The meaning of this continuity of the prayer might help us to understand that there is no separation between the "not-knowing of God" and between the "Mercy of God," that one requires the other, that it is the mercy of God giving us permission to pray to God, as long as we accept the "not-knowing of God." Bahá'u'lláh does not talk about the human suppliant. Rather, He talks about God and His mercy, which allows us to pray, even if we know not how to do it. Yet, it is clear that this understanding was there from the beginning of the prayer allowing us to pray with Bahá'u'lláh, to speak His words of prayer while He gives us the confidence to confess our impotence.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Thou hast, however, by virtue of Thy mercy that hath surpassed the kingdoms of earth and heaven, deigned to accept from Thy servants the laud and honor they pay to Thine own exalted Self, and hast bidden them celebrate Thy glory, that the ensigns of Thy guidance may be unfurled in Thy cities and the tokens of Thy mercy be spread abroad among Thy nations, and that each and all may be enabled to attain unto that which Thou hast destined for them by Thy decree, and ordained unto them through Thine irrevocable will and purpose.

Personal Reflection

Bahá'u'lláh, in this long sentence seems to express two thoughts. The first answers the question of how can we pray if we do not know how, the other concerns what the gift of prayer means to mankind.

Why and how can we pray, when we do not know God, cannot know God and cannot praise him? The answer is clear and simple: by virtue of God's mercy alone can we pray. God's mercy is additionally

described in its absolute surpassing character. God's mercy not only surpasses our understanding, it surpasses the kingdoms of earth and heaven, i.e. the whole universe, known and unknown. No matter what science will reveal about heaven and earth, no matter what human progress and evolution will be in the future, God's mercy surpasses it.

This is another statement about the unknowable essence of God, of the absolute impossibility of man, of all men, to know God. Yet, God's mercy is above and beyond this impossibility and opens up for man the possibility to pray to him. God has ordered humankind to *celebrate His glory*. God has deigned to accept man's efforts to *laud and honor His exalted self*. The movement comes from God Who extends to man the possibility of paying honor to His exalted self. God gives man the power of reason to seek to know Him.

What does that fact mean to humankind? Bahá'u'lláh describes the consequences in beautiful imagery encompassing the whole world. Ensigns, colorful banners of joy and guidance will be unfurled in the cities and the tokens of Thy mercy will be spread abroad among Thy nations. All men will be able to attain to what God has decreed for them. This is a prayer anticipating the Kingdom of God, like the Lord's Prayer "*Thy Kingdom come*" (Matthew 6:10).

Theological Comment: Predestination and Freedom

This issue raises the old question of predestination as it was debated by Christian theologians mainly since the reformation. The freedom of man, on the one hand, and the foreknowledge, or pre-destining of man's fate by God is the issue of this theological debate. How can God know the individual fate of man and how can man freely decide his fate given this absolute foreknowledge of God? How can man be called free to pray, when he is totally dependent on God in doing so? The solution, which transcends logic, is in the fact that the

freedom of man is a gift of God's mercy, something that surpasses our understanding and is therefore included in His foreknowledge. Actually, the word foreknowledge is erroneous in itself because there is no "before" or "after" in God; time is part of creation only. In the final analysis, we do not know how, we only know that God's mercy allows it. The old debate about predestination could only arise, because theologians thought they could know God and could define His actions according to human logic and according to the time constraint to which all creation is subject.

In the Bahá'í Faith this thinking is reversed. Bahá'u'lláh clearly affirms in the beginning of the prayer that we know not, that we cannot know and that even the Manifestations of God do not know God. We cannot attain to the knowledge of God at all, because God is much more exalted and removed from human speculation than ever thought before, and this is what it means to *laud and honor* Him rather than constructing a God of superstition and imagination. On the other hand, we believe that He is closely and intimately related to humankind, through His mercy, and therefore He is called "*the most hidden of the hidden and the most manifest of the manifest.*" (PM 248)

The fact that for each and all, the future is destined by God's decree and has been ordained through His irrevocable will and purpose does not mean that man is not free in his decisions, it only means, that man's freedom does not limit God because it is a gift of God's mercy, which surpasses any limitation by time because time is a fact of creation and cannot be used when talking about God.

Therefore, considering man's impotence in the face of the knowledge of God, Bahá'u'lláh prays in the next section to God to open His beauty to the seeking faithful and to give access to the bounty of His mercy.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Having testified, therefore, unto mine own impotence and the impotence of Thy servants, I beseech Thee, by the brightness of the light of Thy beauty, not to refuse Thy creatures attainment to the shores of Thy most holy ocean.

Personal Reflection

Here Bahá'u'lláh revisits the statement of man's impotence and again clearly includes all of mankind in this statement, himself and all Thy servants. He continues to ask for God's mercy, described as God's beauty, brightness and light. This is a poetical description of what could metaphysically be described as the opening of God to man. Light and beauty are the attributes that open all beings to sight and delight, to human enjoyment and knowing. If we can see the light and the beauty of anything, we can enjoy and understand it. This is true for a work of art, for the beauty of a person, and, for the enjoyment of life and of the whole world. Even the light of understanding that science brings is included here.²⁷ The modern quest of science to see, to know, and to understand this world becomes worship, like every work performed in the service of humanity. Here, it is applied to God, Whom we cannot know, but Who gives us the gift of light and beauty emanating from Him through his Messengers. This light, which is the origin of all understanding, is also implanted in all beings of this world, especially in man.

Another image is brought to our attention. The immensity and inexhaustibility of the Revelation is compared with the ocean, which confronts the seeker so he prays to be able to attain to its shores. This leaves the infinite depth and expanse of the ocean for the future evolution of the human soul through eternity. The exploration of the shores of this ocean will promote the highest hopes for mankind: "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."(GWB 215)

We are here now at the juncture, where the impotence confessed to above becomes the power to attain to the light and the beauty of God in our life and in this world. In many prayers, Bahá'u'lláh expresses the joy and fulfillment that this attainment can give. Paradoxically, all that was acknowledged before as unattainable now becomes the most attainable, becomes the essence of the life of the believer. Being detached from all knowledge leads to the knowing on a deeper level, which surpasses all other knowledge. God the most hidden becomes the most manifest.

Consider this passage of another prayer of Bahá'u'lláh:

I am well aware, O my Lord, that I have been so carried away by the clear tokens of Thy loving-kindness, and so completely inebriated with the wine of Thine utterance, that whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies.

By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.

I swear by Thy might, O Thou in Whose grasp are the reins of all mankind, and the destinies of the nations! I am so inflamed by my love for Thee, and so inebriated with the wine of Thy oneness, that I can hear from the whisper of the winds the sound of Thy glorification and praise, and can recognize in the murmur

of the waters the voice that proclaimeth Thy virtues and Thine attributes, and can apprehend from the rustling of the leaves the mysteries that have been irrevocably ordained by Thee in Thy realm. (PM 271–272)

Theological Comment: Human Progress— Progressive Theology

Comparing the human learning process and the divine learning process described in this prayer, with those of prayer beginning “I-know-not” reveals two aspects. The first has to do with the way learning happens; the other concerns how we know things. The latter raises epistemological questions about knowing. There is one aspect that is usually not considered when learning is considered.

If we look at the diagram below we find the words “ability” and “permission” as the first steps from not knowing to knowing. Certainly we need to be able to know, but do we need permission to know? While this is not always true, in important issues we cannot learn and know something, unless we have the permission to learn it. Even a teacher will tell her students, you are not ready for knowing this or that, you have to first get my permission and you will get it when you are ready. Obviously, we are not to know many things of a private nature about another person unless we get the permission of the person. We are not allowed to know about specific government secrets, unless we get the permission to learn about it and to know it. The same is true and even more important when we speak of the knowledge of God. We do not only have to have God’s permission to know, we need His help and assistance in order to know. God gives us the ability and the permission to know. And that is expressed in this prayer with the statements on the right side below, which are all quoted from the prayer.

We are asked to pray to God, *“that each and all may be enabled to attain unto that which Thou hast destined for them by Thy decree, and ordained unto them through Thine irrevocable will and purpose.”* (PM 123) God’s irrevocable will and purpose enables us to do, what we “know-not’ to do, such as *“how to sing Thy praise, how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name.”* (PM 123)

The instructions are given and we are drawn *“through the Divine sweetness of Thy melodies, towards the throne of Thy glory and the seat of Thine eternal holiness.”* (PM 123) Even the practice of what we learned is ultimately God’s work: He has to draw us to do what gets us closer to Him, so everybody can *“ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth.”*

The Human Learning
Process

1. Not knowing
2. Ability
3. Permission
4. Instruction
5. Practice

The Divine Learning Process

6. “I know not how to...”
7. “that all may be enabled...”
8. ” by Thy decree and... will...
9. “Divine sweetness of Thy melodies”
10. “Cause him, then, to ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth...”

This description of the learning process describes the need to recognize that it is God, in His mercy, Who enables us and gives us permission to know Him. What is it in the human condition that enables us to accept this ability and permission given by God? With this question we approach the field of epistemology, the field of “how do we know?”

There are at least three ways of knowing, Reason, Intuition and Vision (Anschauung). The Catholic theologian Romano Guardini has defined these three ways in his book on the oppositeness of reality, which he calls “Gegensatz.”²⁸ In this description the three ways of knowing are described as Rational, Transrational and Superrational.

We can refer these three ways of knowing to the three instruments used by the mind: the left hemisphere of the brain corresponds to the rational, the right to the transrational way of knowing i.e. to intuition. The third way of knowing is best attributed to the heart, bringing unity and vision into the area of knowing.²⁹ The rational is the abstract-logical way of thinking. What Guardini calls Transrational is the way of knowing the individual-in-the-concrete, as a distinct living being. These two ways are in opposition, are a “Gegensatz” i.e., they are opposite, yet have something in common, and, therefore cannot exist without each other.

Whenever we think about an abstract concept, the concrete reality which it refers to must—at least to some degree—be included in the same thought. The same is true when we consider the individual. We always have to include in this thought the abstract and general meaning. For example, we cannot think about humanness, without knowing and including in this thought the individual humans we know; whenever we think about a human being we must include all that generally belongs to humanness in this thought, as well. Only a sociopath can treat humans like things, using and abusing them, without considering or caring about the specific human quality of every human being. This is the condition of the *Gegensatz*, of the opposite, which is pervasive in all thinking about living concrete reality.

The third way of knowing is called Superrational (Über-rational). It includes the first two modes of knowing and exists in the tension of this *Gegensatz* and it is described by Guardini in the following way (translated by this writer):

To understand the core of the living reality and to approach its mystery is not a nebulous imagination, or a mysterious experience; it rather takes vision (*Anschauung*), which is possible only in tension, and in respect of the mystery requiring discipline and self-control.

Real vision is not a mysterious experience, even though it approaches the mystery of reality, it includes the tension between reason and intuition, and this consideration is important, it requires discipline and self-control. In other words, it is not easy and requires efforts in the area of ethics.

Bahá'u'lláh mentions the same qualities when talking about his Revelation and how to approach its sublime Vision:

Were the breezes of Revelation to seize thee, thou wouldst flee the world, and turn unto the Kingdom, and wouldst expend all thou possessest, that thou mayest draw nigh unto this sublime Vision.” (ESW 56)

While Guardini talks about discipline and self-control, Bahá'u'lláh expands that concept and speaks about additionally *expending all thou possessest* as demanded by Jesus:

The young man saith unto him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.
(Matthew 19:20–21)

To understand this demand, which was unacceptable to the young man at the time of Jesus, must it not be said that following Christ required total detachment from all possessions and not necessarily the selling of all possessions? Does not the statement of Bahá'u'lláh imply the same detachment? This transcends the concept of Guardini that having this vision requires discipline and self-control. In any case, vision is not easy, and it is, like all real understanding, based on the permission and ability given by God, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá interpreted this situation:

Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

But the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities. (SAQ 208)

Here vision means acquaintance with divine secrets and heavenly realities, which directs our thoughts to the understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

To understand the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, indeed, to understand any Revelation, this vision is required and it is a gift of God to the person who is detached from the possessions of this world. Additionally, to acquire this vision and to understand the Revelation is a process, which never ends, individually and even collectively, until the next Manifestation brings a renewed vision.

Another image is presented in the next sentence of the prayer:

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Draw them, then, O my God, through the Divine sweetness of Thy melodies, towards the throne of Thy glory and the seat of Thine eternal holiness.

Personal Reflection

The divine sweetness of these melodies will draw mankind towards the throne of God's glory and the seat of His eternal holiness. Glory and holiness are described as sweet melodies and we are reminded here of the nightingales that play such a role as indicators of divine love to the believer in the Bahá'í writings. This picture of God as drawing humanity to Him is used by Bahá'u'lláh for all Dispensations. The melody of the Divine Messenger is like the song of the nightingale, the beauty of the rose and the scent of the hyacinth.³⁰

Theological Comment: Progressive Revelation

When we pray these words, we are reminded of the mercy of God, Who sends His messengers, a Krishna, a Buddha, a Moses, a Zoroaster, a Jesus, a Muhammad and finally the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to us, so we may pray to be drawn to their message, their eternal World of God. It gives us the understanding that outside the great religions of the World, as they are revealed through the Messengers of God, our understanding of the world is not complete. As religion needs the assistance of science to avert superstition, so science needs the assistance of religion to prevent materialism and all its dire consequences³¹.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Thou art, verily, the Most Powerful, the Supreme Ruler, the Great Giver, the Most Exalted, the Ever-Desired.

Personal Reflection

Here the prayer seems to close with an invocation to God Whom we “know not,” as we prayed before. We are invited to praise and acknowledge Him with the words of the Messengers of God. What are the attributes that are invoked here? First, God is described as the Most Powerful. We can praise God with that name, as long as we have first testified to our impotence as servants of God. The Most Powerful is experienced in our lives when we experience the mercy of God and the fulfillment of all our aspirations in our love to Him. This experience prevents us from transferring God’s power into the human situation except through His mercy.

Power is never to be used against another person; not in the name of “true” religion against “false” religion, not in the name of orthodoxy and church administration and not in inquisition or excommunication. No eternal damnation can be invoked merely on the basis of human power even in a church or religion. Only if we could know God with our power could we claim this divine right. Not even if

we could have attained to Him with our own power and knowledge, could we claim this right, could we use our power to exercise church politics and authority. Nothing of that kind is possible after the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The same applies individually. We can and must praise God as the Most Powerful. Yet, we cannot derive from this knowledge any power over other human beings. Neither in gossip, nor in suspicion, neither in politics nor in personal interaction with others, neither in love, nor in hate can we assume God's privilege of power. God gives no one this power over his or her fellow human being.

Theological Comment: Administrative Power

Any power exerted in politics and civil interactions is of a different sort: it is not personal, but administrative only and it depends on the needs of society. It never stretches into the area of consciousness, of thought or religious belief where independent investigation is the rule. Civil as well as religious societies must exert power to keep themselves organized and orderly. Civil society must incarcerate or otherwise make the criminal unable to disturb the peace. Churches and religious communities must be able to exclude members who deliberately try to destroy their community. The power is conditioned and should not be exerted other than by law and in a proper process. That should eliminate the individual abusing this power of administration.

One of the greatest differences between the Bahá'í Faith and my previous experiences as a priest in the Catholic Church was the form of its administration and how modern man has difficulties with the present regime in the Church. With the best intentions and in the sincere belief they are following God's will, the Popes in the Catholic Church seem to have created more difficulties for the believers than all the atheistic philosophers and aberrant theologians together.

This is why many Catholics now abandon the Church or at least become passive and discouraged. I am not saying that there are no possible problems of power even in the Bahá'í Faith, but the structure of the administration and the abolition of priesthood and clergy will make any aberration temporary and transient. The problem in the Catholic Church is the fact that this situation is believed to be unchangeable because it is based on dogma.

The administrative authority of the Bahá'í Faith functions on a different level. It is exerted not by one but by a group of faithful servants in consultation. It is not given to making new laws and dogmas that cannot be revised in the future. It is instituted for protection and for assistance to the individual believer and the Cause. Fortunately, the Bahá'í administration has not only the guidance of the Spirit and a functional infallibility, it can, whenever times change, revise its decisions and provide new guidance in the light of new consultation.

God, the Supreme Ruler, is another title that has to be seen in that light. Nobody on this earth is a ruler in his own right; there is no ruler, who rules as the Son of Heaven, as the Chinese emperors used to be called; there is no ruler in the name of God, as absolute kings and emperors in Europe used to claim. There is no power in the name of the leader of a race or class either. The time of dictators and autocratic rulers is over, even of rulers imposing their power on the faithful of a specific religion.³²

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

The Great Giver, the Most Exalted, the Ever-Desired

Personal Reflection

These three attributes express the mercy of God and man's need for this mercy. Since we know not and are helpless without the gift from God, we praise him as the Great Giver. We exalt Him beyond all

limits and declare him as the desire of the whole creation. All religions of God have expressed this need in their prayers and adorations.

While most human prayers are basically a request to God for his assistance in this world, this prayer only now turns to ask God a favor.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Grant, then, O my God, that Thy servant who hath turned towards Thee, hath fixed his gaze upon Thee, and clung to the cord of Thy mercifulness and favor, may be enabled to partake of the living waters of Thy mercy and grace.

Personal Reflection

Again, the praying believers are described in their relation to God. They have turned towards Him and have fixed their gaze upon him, clinging to the cord of God's mercy and favor. This movement towards God is the precondition of any prayer. Only when we assume this attitude, are we allowed to ask God for a favor. Here is no mention of knowledge and theology, no attempt to try to attain closeness and understanding of God's ways and plans. The description is that of men or women who are servants and who turn to their master with no questions and no demands, except for asking God's mercy.

It is impossible here to elaborate on this openness to God, which has been required in all dispensations of God. For example, Jesus required the rich man to leave everything behind and follow him (Luke 18. 22–23). In the description of the true seeker Bahá'u'lláh has laid out the qualifications to participate in God's favors.

The first thing we are taught to ask is for the ability to partake of the *living waters of Thy mercy and grace*. What are those living waters and how does Bahá'u'lláh use this imagery in His writings? The following is a selection of passages in which the diverse meanings of "living waters" is presented. There are many more quotes than could

be referenced here, but these give an idea of the widespread use of this phrase.

Living waters of Thy mercy and grace (PM 124)

Living waters of Thy pardon (ESW 6)

Living waters of uprightness and understanding (KA 139)

Living waters of immortality (ESW 38)

Living waters of God's counsels (ESW 59)

Living waters of acknowledgment (ESW 161)

Living waters of faith (ESW 169)

Living waters of friendliness and charity (GWB 7)

Living waters of truth (PM 197)

'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the "living waters of the teachings of God" as the only means to bring tranquility and peace to the whole world.³³ These are the gifts of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. The fruit of His teaching and the bounty is promised to every believer. A meditation on these gifts alone could last a lifetime and is the basis of every prayer to God, the Great Giver.

There is one more surprise in this prayer—it is the reference to the highest aspiration of the one, who contemplates this prayer and the fulfillment of this aspiration.

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Cause him from that which Thou dost possess, then, to ascend unto the heights to which he aspireth, and withhold him not from that which Thou dost possess.

Personal Reflection

Here we are encouraged to ask God to cause us to ascend unto the heights to which we aspire. How can we ask for more? How could

we ask for anything better? What else is there to ask for, except asking for the heights of our aspiration? Therefore, we ask that God not withhold what He possesses. Obviously, this must be the height of our aspiration, or it certainly should be.

We need to look back at our personal aspiration and wishes and the gifts we usually ask in our prayers to God. While it is stated that it is acceptable to formulate your own prayers, this need to direct our aspiration towards God, should make us careful. The conclusion is to rarely pray with one's own words, and always use the words of the Manifestations. That way, one at least is sure that the words are right, and all what has to be done, and this is not easy, is to conform to our heart's desire, which should be the Revelation Bahá'u'lláh has given us.

As St. Paul said (1 Corinthians 13:11): "*When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child, but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see in a mirror, but then face to face.*" We can no longer think as children especially about God, we can no longer speak in our prayer like children; we need to see God in a more mature fashion because humankind has reached the stage of maturity, as Bahá'u'lláh stated:

No sooner had mankind attained the stage of maturity, than the Word revealed to men's eyes the latent energies with which it had been endowed—energies which manifested themselves in the plenitude of their glory when the Ancient Beauty appeared, in the year sixty, in the person of `Alí-Muḥammad, the Báb.
(GWB 77)

Alternatively, `Abdu'l-Bahá has interpreted the same situation of humankind, which has matured during the last two thousand years of Christianity and Islam:

The Cause of Bahá'u'lláh is the same as the Cause of Christ. It is the same Temple and the same Foundation. Both of these are spiritual springtimes and seasons of the soul-refreshing awakening and the cause of the renovation of the life of mankind. The spring of this year is the same as the spring of last year. The origins and ends are the same. The sun of today is the sun of yesterday. In the coming of Christ, the divine teachings were given in accordance with the infancy of the human race. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have the same basic principles, but are according to the stage of the maturity of the world and the requirements of this illumined age. (BWF 400)

The maturity of mankind, the new revelation of God, the global tests and upheavals of the last generations—all of these are included in the not knowing and yet knowing of God Who is “*the most hidden of the hidden and the most manifest of the manifest.*” Do we not all have to go through this experience of loss of old securities and concepts, of traditional rituals and customs, of ingrained understandings and misunderstandings? The Dawn of the new revelation tests us to see if we have this measure of maturity. It is the quest of a new humanity in the Kingdom of God.

This promised development of humankind is a slow, spiritual process; it works its way from person to person and is not a mass movement which can be covered by the media, measured by government statistics or proclaimed by election outcomes. Yet, its “latent energies” are transforming the world while we speak and its Divine fecundity can be observed by anybody who will look and has the eyes to see. As Bahá'u'lláh has stated at the beginning of His mission: “*The universe is pregnant with these manifold bounties, awaiting the hour when the effects of Its unseen gifts will be made manifest in this world.* (KI 60–61)

This hour of God has come. We can see the influence of the Faith in the world; we can teach it and live it and we need to be alert to

all the signs and events that tell us about it. This appears to be what Shoghi Effendi intended to say, when fifty years ago a letter written on his behalf stated, “*The world has—at least the thinking world—caught up by now with all the great and universal principles enunciated by Bahá'u'llah over 70 years ago, and so of course it does not sound ‘new’ to them. However, we know that the deeper teachings, the capacity of His projected World Order to re-create society, are new and dynamic. It is these we must learn to present intelligently and enticingly to such men!*”³⁴

It might well be that even the facts of atheism and agnosticism, which influence so many of our contemporaries are not merely a negative and deplorable development of history. These historical developments have certainly caused great pain and destructiveness to humankind, yet, were also caused by the distortion of religion, at least to some degree. `Abdu'l-Bahá clearly states: “*If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act.*” (PT 130) Therefore, we can join Bahá'u'lláh in this prayer and admit that we know not and thereby learn from him how to pray in a world of unbelievers. We can do this because we know this world is getting ready for the Kingdom of God, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

The prayer closes with a final Praise to God;

Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

Thou art, verily, the Ever-Forgiving, the Most Bountiful.

Personal Reflection

Again, it is affirmed here that God is verily the Ever-Forgiving. The errors and sinfulness of humankind can only find forgiveness from God. We need to pray not only for forgiveness of our transgressions but also for the forgiveness of the transgressions of this century with the knowledge that God is the Ever-Forgiving. That must be our approach to the victims and perpetrators alike, to the people who

caused the terror and who suffered from it. They—and we—need the forgiveness of God.

God is the Most Bountiful who gives freely and makes us free.

Theological Comment: God's Grace

Let's consider the last attribute, the Most Bountiful. Not knowing the original meaning of this word as written by Bahá'u'lláh, we have to follow the translation, which fortunately is from Shoghi Effendi's pen. We know that he used an English Dictionary extensively in his translations to find the fitting words. So it seems to be legitimate to look up the word bountiful in the dictionary³⁵ where the following definitions are given: "1. Full of bounty, liberal in bestowing gifts and favors; gracious; 2. Abundant, Plentiful."

This Divine grace here certainly includes all the Gifts we have described above. Especially the gift of the living waters is meant here, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls the "*living waters of the teachings of God.*" This includes the supreme and unique gift of freedom to humankind as well.

Conclusion

With this understanding, I read the last sentence of praise in two complimentary ways. First, God gives freely and graciously, and what is more, He gives me the gift of freedom to accept His mercy and to sing His praise. Knowing that such freedom includes the possibility to refuse to obey God or even work against Him, we learn as well, that even opposition to God's will does not limit the providence and wisdom of God, so that "*all abide by His bidding.*" (SWB 15) When it was stated in the beginning, that "*I know not how to sing Thy praise,*

Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name”, and when we accept the truth of this statement, we now can freely accept the gift of God to know Him and to love Him and to give praise to Him, because God is the Ever-Forgiving and Most Bountiful, the Most Giving, giving freedom and choice, giving humankind independence and self, yet giving the ability to freely choose God, to love Him, and to accept the infinite bounty of God.

Lights of 'Irfán Book Thirteen

NOTES

- 1 Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*. (PM 122) Bahá'í Writings are quoted according to the accepted abbreviation. In this paper, all quotations from Holy Scriptures are in italics
- 2 Nader Saiedi. *Logos and Civilization, Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, University Press of Maryland, 2000, page 295.
- 3 Edward T. Oakes, SJ, and David Moss, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*. Cambridge University Press, 2004, page 265. ISBN 0-521-89147-7
- 4 Karen Armstrong in her book *The Battle for God*, (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2000) has described the change in the European civilization during modern times, especially in the chapter: "Christians, The Brave New World" (1492–1870), pp 61–97, spanning the time from the Reformation to Darwin, Hegel and Nietzsche and culminating in the statement of the Death of God.
- 5 Karl Marx, "Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" in *Karl Marx selected writings*. Edited by David McLellan, Oxford University Press, 1977, page 63.
- 6 Teilhard de Chardin. *Christianity and Evolution*. San Diego, New York, London: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969 page 28.
- 7 Described extensively by Will & Ariel Durant in *The age of Voltaire*. New York: MJF Books, 1992, especially in Book V, *The Attack upon Christianity 1730–1774*.
- 8 Wucherer Huldenfeld, Augustinus Karl; J. Figl and S. Mühlberger, Editors, *Welt Phänomen Atheismus*, ("World-Phenomenon Atheism") Basel: Herder, Wien Freiburg, 1979, especially in the chapter by Max Josef Suda, page 89 and passim.
- 9 Stephane Courtois et al. in: *The Black Book of Communism, Crimes, Terror, Repression*. Cambridge Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 1999, page 4.
These are the "cold" statistics of the victims of communism:
U.S.S.R 20 million deaths Eastern Europe 1 million deaths
China 65 million deaths Latin America 150,000 deaths
Vietnam 1 million deaths Africa 1.7 million deaths
North Korea 2 million deaths Afghanistan 1.5 million deaths
Cambodia: 2 million deaths
- 10 A.K. Wucherer et al, editors, *Welt Phänomen Atheismus*, (Worldwide Phenomenon Atheism). Vienna, Freiburg, Basel: Herder, 1979, confer the contribution of A.K. Wucherer, "Phänomen und Bedeutung des gegenwärtigen Atheism" (Phenomenon and Meaning of present Atheism) p. 35–58.
- 11 Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, 1848.

Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

-
- 12 Karen Armstrong, *A History of God, The 4000-Year Quests of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*. New York: Alfred and Knopf, 1994, p. 399.
- 13 *O My brother! When a true seeker determineth to take the step of search in the path leading unto the knowledge of the Ancient of Days, he must, before all else, cleanse his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. He must purge his breast, which is the sanctuary of the abiding love of the Beloved, of every defilement, and sanctify his soul from all that pertaineth to water and clay, from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments. He must so cleanse his heart that no remnant of either love or hate may linger therein, lest that love blindly incline him to error, or that hate repel him away from the truth.* (GWB 264).
- 14 Stephen N. Lambden, in *Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, Vol. 8, pp. 37–78. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1997. ISBN 0-933770-95-2 (HBk) ISBN 0-933770-96-0 (PBk).
- 15 Quoted from Bernard Casper, *Das dialogische Denken. Eine Untersuchung der religionsphilosophischen Bedeutung Franz Rosenzweigs, Ferdinand Ebners und Martin Bubers*. (Dialogical Thinking, an Investigation about the Importance in the Philosophy of Religion of Franz Rosenzweig, Ferdinand Ebner and Marin Buber) Freiburg/Breisgau, Germany 1967, page 92.
- 16 St. Paul in his letter to the Colossians (1:16–17) stated the same about Christ: “All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things and in Him all things consist.”
- 17 The concept of “universal Christ,” and “of the Christ of the Evolution” coined by Teilhard de Chardin in his article about *Christology and Evolution*, (in *Christianity and Evolution*, A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company; San Diego, New York, London, 1969) puts his understanding of Christ (for Bahá'ís that means all Manifestations) into the modern scientific context of evolution following the Pauline view of Christ. By stating that the Manifestation holds the immediate destiny of the world in His hand, Bahá'u'lláh, as well, extends the static formulation of the gospel “all things were made through him” into the dynamic evolution of the world and, therefore into the present. This Teilhardian perspective of a universal Christology (could we say as well “Manifestology”?) based on the modern scientific idea of the world as evolution was followed up in Wolfgang Klebel “Unity and Progressive Revelation: Comparing Bahá'í Principles with the Basic Concepts of Teilhard de Chardin.” in *Lights of Irfán*, Book Five, 2004, pages 77–108.
- 18 In another prayer Bahá'u'lláh describes this situation, with empathic understanding:
He Who was Thy Spirit (Jesus), O my God, withdrew all alone in the darkness of the night preceding His last day on earth, and falling on His face to the ground besought Thee saying: “If it be Thy will, O my Lord, my Well-Beloved, let this cup, through Thy grace and bounty, pass from me.”

Lights of 'Irfán Book Thirteen

By Thy beauty, O Thou Who art the Lord of all names and the Creator of the heavens! I can smell the fragrance of the words which, in His love for Thee, His lips have uttered, and can feel the glow of the fire that had inflamed His soul in its longing to behold Thy face and in its yearning after the Day-Spring of the light of Thy oneness, and the Dawning-Place of Thy transcendent unity. (PM 192–193).

- 19 This understanding of the Manifestation not only being the cause of creation, but also the sustaining power behind the world, could be understood within the Teilhardian concept of the Universal Christ, the final focus point, the Omega point of creation (Revelation 1:9) and the Pauline theology of Christ who “is all and is in all” (Col. 3:11). The new understanding expressed in Teilhard’s opus is the scientific understanding of the world as an evolution of the spirit in matter, of the principle of unity in plurality, of body and spirit, which fits surprisingly well into the Bahá’í writings, as especially expressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The correspondence of these two worldviews, one from the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, the other from the Christian revelation as understood in a new way by Teilhard, is worth further exploration following the statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Furthermore, religion must conform to reason and be in accord with the conclusions of science. For religion, reason and science are realities; therefore, these three, being realities, must conform and be reconciled. A question or principle, which is religious in its nature, must be sanctioned by science. Science must declare it to be valid, and reason must confirm it in order that it may inspire confidence” (PUP 394).
- 20 Bishop John Shelby Spong. *Why Christianity Must Change or Die.*, San Francisco: Harper,, 1998. In this, and in his other books, Spong has expounded on this topic that a modern man cannot simply believe in the traditional Biblical God. Spong sees himself in exile, waiting for the return of Christ in a new advent.
- 21 A. N. Wilson. *God’s Funeral.* New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999.
- 22 The doctrine about the justification of God in the face of physical and moral evil is called theodicy.
- 23 Modern man cannot believe in a good God who creates a world that was good and then became bad through the original sin of the first man Adam. This in turn required the salvation of the world through a divine sacrifice. As a matter of fact Teilhard, a Jesuit, had expressed this impossibility in one of his early writings, which did not pass the censorship of his order, consequently most of his writings were only published after his death and he turned from teaching theology to studying paleontology in China. (See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution.* San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1969, note on page 55).
- 24 Teilhard de Chardin has addressed this problem in the book *The Phenomenon of Man.* New York: Harper & Row, 1975, pages 311–313) and has attempted to see this issue in a much wider perspective. His thoughts are surprisingly close to those of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, who describes sin as falling back into the animal

Reflections on a Prayer of Bahá'u'lláh

nature of man and evil as absence of good and not a dualistic counterpoint to God. Teilhard sees sin in a similar context of man evolving in a spiritual progression and sin and evil as a problem, or a fall from progressive development in the direction to “humanization” and “spiritualization” of the world. This seeming parallel certainly needs further illumination.

- 25 The concept of a God of Evolution, coined by Teilhard de Chardin is such an attempt of the scientific understanding of the world and implies as well that the old concept of God as a static being in heaven is scientifically untenable, (Confer. *Christianity and Evolution*, *ibid.* Page 237) and especially in: *The Phenomenon of Man*. New York: Harper and Row, 1975 *passim*, especially the Postscript, page 300–310.

How some understanding of Quantum Mechanics can assist in understanding the truth about the Manifestations of God was presented in an ‘Irfán Occasional Paper, Wolfgang Klebel, *Revelation of Unity, Unity of Revelation, Bahá'u'lláh's Most Sublime Vision*, ‘Irfán Colloquia Publications, Bahá'í National Center, Evanston, IL 60201-1611, 2009, especially pages 50–81.

- 26 One way to try to understand it is the following thought. Each progressive Revelation opens the ability of man to know and love God, they even illuminate man to see and find God in the nature of all created things and in men's own nature. The Bahá'í writings in numerous places speak about the openness of the creation to the knowledge of God, but that knowledge originates in a movement from God to the world, which seems to be the truth behind the notion of creation, incarnation and detachment.
- 27 The dedication of scientists to the service of humanity is described as worship by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *“In the Bahá'í Cause arts, sciences and all crafts are (counted as) worship. The man who makes a piece of notepaper to the best of his ability, conscientiously, concentrating all his forces on perfecting it, is giving praise to God. Briefly, all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity.”* (PT 176–177)
- 28 Romano Guardini, *Der Gegensatz, Versuch zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten*, (The Opposite, attempt to a Philosophy of the Living–Concrete). Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald Verlag, 4th edition, 1998.
- 29 Confer: Wolfgang Klebel. “In the Pure Soil of Thy Heart, in Bahá'í Writings and Neurocardiology.” in *Lights of ‘Irfán*, Book Ten, 2009, pp.131–148
- 30 *“They that valiantly labor in quest of God, will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, be so attached and wedded unto that City, that a moment's separation from it would to them be unthinkable. They will hearken unto infallible proofs from the Hyacinth of that assembly, and will receive the surest testimonies from the beauty of its Rose, and the melody of its Nightingale. Once in about a thousand years shall this City be renewed and readorned....”* (GWB 269)

“That City is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus, the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, the Qur’án; in this day, the Bayán; and in the Dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest, His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book that standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme.” (GWB 269–270) (KI 199).

- 31 To quote only one passage of (‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *“Religion and science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.”* (PT 143).
- 32 It is interesting what Bahá’u’lláh wrote to Pope Pius IX, just around the time the Pope defined his own infallibility at the Vatican I council. If seen in the light of God’s supreme power and of men’s inability to know and to attain this power of God, it certainly limits the functions of the Pope and every future religious leader. Bahá’u’lláh in his message praises the Pope with these words: *“You, in truth, are one of the sons of heaven in his name.”* And yet he directs him to *“Abandon thy kingdom unto the kings, and emerge from thy habitation, with thy face set towards the Kingdom, and, detached from the world, then speak forth the praises of thy Lord betwixt earth and heaven. Thus hath bidden thee He Who is the Possessor of Names, on the part of thy Lord, the Almighty, the All-Knowing.”* (PB 85).
- 33 *“Note thou: could these fevers in the world of the mind, these fires of war and hate, of resentment and malice among the nations, this aggression of peoples against peoples, which have destroyed the tranquillity of the whole world ever be made to abate, except through the living waters of the teachings of God? No, never!”* (SWA 53).
- 34 Shoghi Effendi. *“The Importance of Deepening.”* *“It is the obligation of Bahá’í scholarship to elucidate these events, to interpret the contemporary writings and to draw the lines into the future”* (CC 230). Or in another excerpt from letters by Shoghi Effendi: (19 April 1947, *The Importance of Deepening*, CC 228–229) it is stated on his behalf: *“Shoghi Effendi has for years urged the Bahá’ís (who asked his advice, and in general also) to study history, economics, sociology, etc., in order to be au courant with all the progressive movements and thoughts being put forth today, and so that they could correlate these to the Bahá’í teachings. What he wants the Bahá’ís to do is to study more, not to study less. The more general knowledge, scientific and otherwise, they possess, the better. Likewise he is constantly urging them to really study the Bahá’í teachings more deeply. One might liken Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings to a sphere; there are points poles apart, and in between the thoughts and doctrines that unite them.”*
- 35 Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, of the English language, unabridged, 1976.