

THE BACKGROUND AND CENTRALITY OF APOPHATIC THEOLOGY IN BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í SCRIPTURE

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God (*haqq*) in His Essence (*bi-dhátihí*) and in His Own Self (*bi-naf-sihí*) hath ever been unseen, inaccessible and unknowable.

—Bahá'u'lláh

Epistle to the Son of the Wolf

Born out of a concern with the ultimate Godhead/Reality/Truth, the precise origins of the concept of the incomprehensible—unknowable God are both complex and uncertain. The idea has multifaceted, sometimes interrelated roots in, for example, Greek philosophical sources, Hellenistic Judaism, and gnostic mythologies as well as the writings of key Christian apologists and Fathers. There are possibly related dimensions of this *via negativa* in non-Semitic, Asian, and other religious and philosophical sources.¹ This paper will trace aspects of the history of the theological position of the unknowability of God in select Abrahamic religions and will highlight its significance for the Bahá'í Faith. It should become clear that the Bahá'í theological position, far from being new or unique in all its aspects, is rooted in the propositions of past religious and philosophical thinkers.

In his *Kitáb-i Íqán* (1861–62), Bahá'u'lláh clearly acknowledges the past realization of the incomprehensibility of the ultimate Reality:

All the Prophets of God (*anbiyá'*) and their chosen Ones (*awsiyá'*), all the divines (*'ulamá'*), the sages (*'urafá'*), and the wise of every generation (*hukamá'*), unanimously recognize their inability to attain unto the comprehension of that Quintessence of all truth (*jawhar al-jawáhir*), and confess their incapacity to grasp Him, Who is the inmost Reality of all things (*haqiqat al-haqá'iq*).²

The Bahá'í *via negativa* is most directly rooted in Bábí theology and in those Islamic, Shí'í, and Shaykhí texts which have apophatic (i.e., negative) theological dimensions. Any student of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions will readily come to realize that the doctrine of the unknowability of the ultimate Godhead is foundational. One can only say what God is not or use negative theological (apophatic) language when referring to God. The incomprehensibility of the nature of the divine Essence (*dhát; dhát al-dhát*) is frequently celebrated in Bábí and Bahá'í scripture; in the extensive Arabic and Persian writings of Sayyid 'Alí Muhammad, the Báb (1819–1850), and Mírzá Husayn 'Alí, Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892). In their writings, apophatic language is quite frequent.³ No Bahá'í systematic theology could be written without locating the essence of divinity beyond the infinite cosmos and totally beyond human knowledge.

Any Bahá'í theology would, however, identify the Manifestation of God as the locus of God's indirect "knowability." While the divine Essence is the center of negative theology, the person of the Manifestation of God, who is born from age to age to communicate the divine Will to humankind, is the center of a positive, affirmative (cataphatic) theology of the nearness and knowability of God. It is by virtue of this doctrine that the divine immanence is realized without incarnation but through the perfect manifestation of the divine Names and Attributes in nature, in humanity, and in the loving parenthood of the Manifestations or Messengers of God.

The Bábí–Bahá'í doctrine of the unknowability of God is not a bloodless theological abstraction emphasizing cold remoteness, but rather one which points to and celebrates the truth of the fact that through the Messengers an intimate nearness to God can be realized. Through God's divine representatives, the Manifestations, God is closer to human beings than their, "jugular vein." (Q. 50: 16b) By virtue of the Manifestation of God, the divine "image" lies deep within the soul of every individual. The absolute deity ever remains, however, outside the scope of the human universe of discourse.

JUDAISM

Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.

—Isaiah 45:15

The Hebrew Bible does not contain a systematic theogony, theology, or theodicy. It champions the oneness and supremacy of the inconceivable yet personal, universal God of Israel (Hebrew: 'Eloha, 'Elohim, YHWH=Yahweh, etc.). Though hardly directly spelled out in Hebrew scripture, the belief that the nature or essence of God is unfathomable came to be paramount in Jewish religious thought. Implying that God is incomparable, Isaiah posed the rhetorical question: "To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him" (Isa 40:18). Indeed, he states that no likeness can be made of the invisible God of Israel (Exod 20:4) who created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1ff).

The absence of images of God in the ancient Israelite cult has been reckoned a "most striking feature."⁴ In referring to the God of Israel as One supremely, One thrice "holy" (Hebrew: *qadosh*), the implication is that God is One distinctly "set apart."⁵ Direct vision of this transcendent God who dwells in "thick darkness" (Hebrew: *araphel*; Exod 20:21; I Kings 8:12) is denied Moses and other human beings (Exod 33:20; Jud 13:22): "The Lord reigns. . . . Clouds and thick darkness are round about him . . ." (Psalm 97:2). Moses himself was refused direct vision of God's "face" (Exod 33:18ff). It has sometimes been reckoned that the mysterious hiddenness of this Self-Existent God is reflected in God's terse Self-designation (in the RSV loose translation) "I AM WHO I AM" (Hebrew: *'ehyeh 'asher 'ehyeh*; Exod 3:14).

During the second Temple period (6th–1st century BCE), reverence for the transcendent God was greatly underlined. Biblical anthropomorphisms were often avoided or reinterpreted. Both the writing and the uttering of God's personal divine name YHWH ("Yahweh") came to be strictly outlawed. It was indirectly pronounced, that is vowelled, as *'Adonai* ("Lord"). The Qumran Jewish faction, sometimes identified with the Essenes, which preserved the "Dead Sea Scrolls," at some stage observed a Community Rule (*Serek ha-yahad*, 1QS. c. 100? BCE) in which the following rather extreme guideline is contained:

If any man has uttered the [Most] Venerable Name even though frivolously, or as a result of shock or for any other reason whatever, while reading the Book or praying, he shall be dismissed and shall return to the Council of the Community no more.⁶

Certain Jewish thinkers and various Christian biblical exegetes found hints of God's unknowability in the Hebrew Bible. In *A Jewish Theology*, Louis Jacobs states that in the history of Jewish religious thought there is "a definite tendency among some thinkers to negate all attributes from God. He is to be described, if He is to be described at all, as unknowable."⁷

The Jewish philosopher and scriptural exegete Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE–c. 50 CE) "has some claim to be called the Father of negative theology."⁸ In his allegorical interpretation of the Greek Septuagint, he often had reason to underline the supreme transcendence and unknowability of the God of Israel, "the Existent" (Greek: *to on*; cf. Plato *Timaeus* 27Df; see De. Som. I:67; De Mut. nom. 10; De post. Caini, 169, etc.). Human beings can grasp the truth of the existence of God but not the nature of the unknowable Being: "Do not . . . suppose that the Existent that truly exists is apprehended by any man. . . . why should we wonder that the Existent cannot be apprehended by men when even the mind in each of us is unknown to us?"⁹

Though Philo found many scriptural indications of God's unknowability, he yet held that God is indirectly knowable through divine works and powers (*dynameis*), through the intermediaries of "Logos," "Idea," and "Angel." While Philo gave great weight to the ultimate unknowability of God, his ontology and anthropology neither rule out the human ecstatic mystical experience of the Godhead nor the vision of God's blinding Light.¹⁰

The largely occasional rabbinic perspectives extant in the Midrashic and Talmudic literatures (1st cent. BCE–6th cent. CE) contain relatively little precise theological speculation. A few references that approach a "theology of negation" have been registered by Louis Jacobs. He notes, for example, that the Palestinian teacher R. Abin said: "When Jacob of the village of Neboria was in Tyre, he interpreted the verse, 'For Thee, silence is praise, O God' (Psalm 65:2) to mean that silence is the ultimate praise of God."¹¹

Influenced by Neoplatonism, many of the medieval Jewish philosophers proposed a negative theology. They held the belief that God transcends all human knowledge and experience. In discussing

the significance of the unity of God in *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, Bahya ibn Pakuda (c. 1050–c. 1156?) propounds such a negative theology. Human beings should negate from God all human and finite limitations and hold that God is unknowable, beyond human comprehension: "The essence of your knowledge of Him, O my brother, is your firm admission that you are completely ignorant of His true essence."¹²

In his *Guide for the Perplexed*, the great Spanish Jewish philosopher Maimonides (Mosheh ben Maimon, c. 1135–1204) dwelt at length on aspects of a negative theology of the nature or essence of God. For him, talk about attributes of the divine nature was tantamount to polytheism. Even negative attributes cannot be befittingly predicated of God:

In the contemplation of His essence, our comprehension and knowledge prove insufficient; in the examination of His works, how they necessarily result from His will, our knowledge proved to be ignorance, and in the endeavour to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure.¹³

The Jewish Kabbalistic tradition, partly rooted in antiquity, upholds an esoteric theology in which the ultimate Godhead, *En Sof* (without limit) is unknowable and incomprehensible. The Infinite without name and beyond attribute is one with, though beyond, the emanated ten *Sefirot* (Spheres) which are his instruments in both the seen and unseen cosmos. Writing about God in the Kabbalah, Gershom Scholem has stated:

From the sayings of some early kabbalists, it is apparent that they are careful not even to ascribe personality to God. Since He is beyond everything—beyond even imagination, thought, or will—nothing can be said of him that is within the grasp of our thought.¹⁴

CHRISTIANITY

As with the Hebrew Bible and rabbinic literatures, the New Testament does not contain a systematic doctrine of God (Greek: *theos*; *kyrios*="Lord"). The word *trinity* is not found, nor is there a sustained deification of Jesus of Nazareth. The Galilean Messiah frequently spoke intimately of the God of the Hebrew Bible as the divine "Father" (Aramaic: *Abba*) though he did not compromise his exalted

transcendence. Certain Pauline and pseudo-Pauline letters uphold the divine transcendence (e.g., 1 Cor. 15:28c; 1 Tim 6:16).¹⁵ The Fourth Gospel records that God cannot be visioned; “No one has ever seen God” (John 1:18a). As a divine manifestation, however, Christ the “Son” has indirectly “made him [God the Father] known” (Jn 1:18b, cf. Jn 6:46).

Due to limitations of space, full details of the numerous testimonies to the incomprehensibility and unknowability of God in the early Christian centuries cannot possibly be registered here. What follows is consequently only a highly selective set of notes. Along with other Abrahamic religious traditions, the Christian doctrine of the unknowability of God is closely associated with the assimilation of various eclectic forms of Middle and Neoplatonic philosophy. It was in part due to this influence that a negative definition of God “appears occasionally and incidentally among the apostolic fathers . . . and is a significant feature among the apologists.”¹⁶ Like Philo, various early Christian apologists use such negative theological epithets as “uncreated,” “uncontained,” “unnameable.”¹⁷ By doing so, they underlined the transcendence of Almighty God.

From the early second century CE, occasional and then numerous Christian writers variously held to a negative theology. The “incomprehensibility” of God was widely affirmed. The partially preserved apocryphal *Preaching of Peter* (*Kerygma Petrou*, 110? CE) contains one of the earliest explicit Christian references to God being “incomprehensible,” the “Incomprehensible who comprehends all things.”¹⁸

Certain early gnostic groups viewed the ultimate Godhead as One unknown. He is the “Wholly Other” not responsible for this material domain of darkness. Such is the basic theodicy of many gnostic groups.¹⁹ Presenting itself as a revelation of “the mysteries” by Jesus the Savior to John Son of Zebedee, *The Apocryphon of John*, one of the Nag Hammadi texts, for example, opens with an extended negative theology.²⁰ The early gnostic *theologia negativa* has been thought to be “an anticipation of the speculations of the Church Fathers, especially of the mystics among them.”²¹

Justin Martyr (c. 100–165) was perhaps the most important second-century apologist. He states that God “the Father” is “nameless” and “unbegotten” and adds: “The name Christ . . . contains an unknown significance, just as the title ‘God’ is not a name, but represents the idea, innate in human nature, of an inexpressible reality.”²²

Christ the “Logos” is a subordinate deity distinguished from the ultimate unknowable Godhead. He is a “visible God”—God born from God, like fire lit from another fire or light radiating from the Sun.²³

While in the late 170s CE, Athenagoras of Athens in his *Presbeia* (Supplication) refers to “the One God” as “incomprehensible,”²⁴ Theophilus, bishop of Antioch (d.c. 180 CE), in his *Ad Autoclycum* (To Autolycus) declared: “The form of God ineffable . . . in glory He is uncontainable, in greatness incomprehensible, in height inconceivable.”²⁵

The famed author of the anti-gnostic *Adversus haeresus* (Against the Heresies), Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons (fl. c. 115–190), spoke of Christ the Logos as the Mediator of revelation. The Son (Jesus) “safeguarded the invisibility of the Father (God),” for the invisible, incomprehensible God in his “true nature and immensity cannot be discovered or described by his creatures.”²⁶

Clement of Alexandria (c. 150–c. 215) reckoned God both one and beyond oneness, a transcendent deity that human thoughts can never fathom. He reckoned Moses a true gnostic (*gnostikos*) since he did not attempt to “encompass” the transcendent God Who “cannot be encompassed,” and since he did not set up any representative “statue” of God in the “sanctuary” (the Holy Place/Holy of Holies, at the centre of the Tabernacle or Jerusalem Temple), “thus making it clear that God is a mystery, invisible and illimitable.”²⁷ Like Philo then, Clement and other apologists specifically refer to God as “unknowable” (Greek: *akataleptos*).²⁸

Son of a Christian martyr, the erudite Origen (c. 185–c. 254), perhaps the most prolific and learned of the fathers of the Church, in his *De Principiis* (On First Principles) and other works, propounds a primarily negative theology. He asserts that, without doubt, God is “incomprehensible and immeasurable,” beyond the grasp of the human mind.²⁹ God comprehends all things but is comprehended by none among creation. Human minds cannot behold God as He is in Himself.³⁰

Like Origen, Plotinus (205–270), founder of Neoplatonism, studied under Ammonius Saccas (d.c. 242), an Alexandrian ex-Christian reconciler of Plato and Aristotle who had an interest in Persian religion. Plotinus settled in Rome around 245 and subsequently composed his fifty-four treatises known, after their grouping by his disciple Porphyry (d. 304), as the *Enneads* (“Nines”; 6x9=54). He was an important and key source of negative and mystical theology,³¹ for he raised these concepts to “philosophical respectability.”³² Among his teachings is that

the divine exists in a "Triad" of "entities" (*hypostases*), the highest degree of which, the "One," transcends *psyche* (Soul) and *nous* (Intellect), is unknowable, beyond human thoughts, essence, existence, and oneness.³³ It can only be inadequately described negatively.³⁴

The adoption of consubstantial (*homoousios*) trinitarianism by more than 300 largely Eastern Christian bishops at the Council of Nicaea (325) did not prevent most Church Fathers from continuing to champion the absolute mystery of the Godhead. The doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God was not eclipsed by either a literalist incarnationism nor a trinitarianism of "substance" (*ousia*). Writing in the Platonic and Alexandrian tradition, the influential bishop and theologian Athanasius (d. 377), a youthful champion of Nicean orthodoxy and anti-Arianism, in his *Letter to the Monks* (358), wrote: ". . . even if it is impossible to grasp what God is, yet it is possible to say what he is not."³⁵

The various major Cappadocian theologians of the fourth century spoke variously about the incomprehensibility of God. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395?), for example, regarded the heights of mystical contemplation as the realization of the incomprehensibility of God. His writings, which were influenced by Neoplatonic works, laid the foundation of a "mysticism of darkness" based upon an exegesis of Moses' Sinaitic ascent (Exodus 24:15ff). This mysticism of darkness is related to the three stages of: (1) being in the "light" (*phos*), purification; (2) being in the "cloud" (*nephele*), contemplation of intelligibles; and (3) being in the "darkness" (*gnophos*; Exod. 20:21), which corresponds to the termination of knowledge before the ultimate inaccessibility of God and the mystical ascent through divine love: "Moses' vision of God began with light; afterwards God spoke to him in a cloud. But when Moses rose higher and became more perfect he saw God in the darkness."³⁶

Among the many illuminating passages in the writings of Gregory, it must suffice to quote a brief extract from his marvellous exegetical treatise *On the Life of Moses*:

What then does it mean that Moses entered the darkness and then saw God in it? [Exod 20:21] . . . as the mind progresses, through an even greater and more perfect diligence, comes to apprehend reality, as it approaches more nearly to contemplation, it sees more clearly what of the divine nature is un contemplated. For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence

thinks it sees, it keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says *No one has ever seen God*, [John 1:18] thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men by every intelligent creature.

When, therefore, Moses grew in knowledge, he declared that he had seen God in the darkness, that is, that he had then come to know that what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension, for the text says, *Moses approached the dark cloud where God was*. What God? He who made darkness his hiding place as David says [Psalm 17:12] who was initiated into the mysteries in the same inner sanctuary.³⁷

Referring to Psalm 138:6 and other biblical texts, Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) warned that it is "presumptuous to claim to know what is God's essence (*ousia*)."³⁸ A number of homilies on the "Incomprehensible nature of God" (*Peri akatalepton*) are extant from the great orator and one-time bishop of Constantinople, John Chrysostom, the "golden mouth" (c. 354–407).³⁹ John quite categorically taught that God in His transcendent majesty is completely beyond the comprehension of even the higher angels, let alone weak, mortal humanity:

We call Him [God] the inexpressible, the unthinkable God, the invisible, the inapprehensible; who quells the power of human speech and transcends the grasp of mortal thought; inaccessible to the angels, unbeheld by the Seraphim, unimagined by the Cherubim, invisible to the rules and authorities and powers, and, in a word, to all creation.⁴⁰

Though not exactly a proponent of negative theology, the influential Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo (d. 430) advised when talking about God: "Put everything from your mind; whatever occurs to you deny it . . . say, He is not that."⁴¹

The writings of the unknown philosopher-monk Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. c. 500, cf. Acts 17:34) present a synthesis of Christian doctrines and neoplatonic thought. Perhaps of Syrian provenance, they are very important texts in the history of Christian mysticism. Lossky reckoned that they "have enjoyed an undisputed authority in the theological tradition of the East, as well as that of the West."⁴²

Following Proclus (d. c. 487), Pseudo-Dionysius seems to have been the first Christian thinker to have made use of the theological terms *apophatic* (negative theology) and *cataphatic* (affirmative theology).⁴³ They subsequently became familiar terms in Byzantine theology, from the time of the Greek theologians Maximus the Confessor (d. 662) and John Damascene (d. c. 749).⁴⁴ For Pseudo-Dionysius, "the reference of both apophatic and cataphatic theology is the One God. . . . It is of the same God that we are to make both affirmations and denials."⁴⁵ For Pseudo-Dionysius, God in Himself is beyond the God we know through cataphatic theology. God is more adequately "known" through apophatic theology, the paradoxical mystical theology of denial or unknowing:

God is known in all things and apart from all things; and God is known by knowledge and by unknowing. Of him there is understanding, reason, knowledge, touch, perception, opinion, imagination, name and many other things, but he is not understood, nothing can be said of him, he cannot be named. He is not one of the things that are, nor is he known in any of the things that are; he is all things in everything and nothing in anything; he is known to all from all things and to no-one from anything. For we rightly say these things of God, and he is celebrated by all beings according to the analogy that all things bear to him as their Cause. But the most divine knowledge of God, that in which he is known through unknowing, according to the union that transcends the mind, happens when the mind, turning away from all things, including itself, is united with the dazzling rays, and there and then illuminated in the unsearchable depth of wisdom.⁴⁶

The first chapter of Pseudo-Dionysius' *The Mystical Theology* poses the question: "What is the Divine darkness?" and opens with a beautiful prayer in which the supplicant says:

. . . Lead us up beyond unknowing and light, up to the farthest, highest peak of mystic scripture, where the mysteries of God's Word lie simple, absolute and unchangeable in the brilliant darkness of a hidden silence.⁴⁷

Mystical union with God is only possible in terms of the darkness of "unknowing" (*agnósia*). It is never an actual or complete union with the unnameable God, the transcendent divinity beyond Being (*hyperousios*). This work and others in the Dionysian corpus have had a major influence upon a range of key Christian thinkers and mystics,

many of whom made significant theological statements about the incomprehensibility of God.

At the end of the Patristic period, John of Damascus (d. 749) taught that positive statements about God do not reveal God's nature. Nothing can be said about God beyond what has been indicated in revelation. In his *On the Orthodox Faith* (I.4), he states that the existence of God is clear though God's nature is incomprehensible: ". . . what He is by His essence and nature, this is altogether beyond our comprehension and knowledge."⁴⁸ The Irish theologian and Neoplatonist philosopher John Scotus Eriugena (d. c. 875) translated the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin and gave a central place to apophatic theology. Scotus Eriugena mediated apophatic theology to the theologians of the Latin Middle Ages, who frequently voice the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. The same doctrine was also upheld by the Christian Scholastics and by notable reformist theologians.

In his *Summa Theologica*, the Italian Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) discussed whether or not God is the object of the science of theology. He noted that theology does "not start by making the assumption of defining God; as St John Damascene remarks, *In God we cannot say what he is.*"⁴⁹ In various of his works, Aquinas echoes his words: "What God actually is always remains hidden from us. And this is the highest knowledge one can have of God in this life, that we know Him to be above every thought that we are able to think of Him."⁵⁰

The unknown English, possibly Carthusian, author of the mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing* (14th cent.) gave preeminence to spiritual love in the quest for experience of the unknowable Godhead beyond reason. Much influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius (Saint Denis), already cited as having said, "The truly divine knowledge of God is that which is known in unknowing," *The Cloud of Unknowing* states that the mystic quest is beyond both intellectual study and the imaginative faculty. In the humble lifting up of the heart to God, one finds a "cloud of unknowing," for "this darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason, and from experiencing him in sweetness of love in your affection."⁵¹

The German philosopher Nicholas of Cusa (d. 1464) wrote a treatise *On Learned Ignorance* (1440). Much influenced by Dionysius and Eriugena, he reckoned "learned ignorance" to be the most advanced

stage of knowledge. Cusa upheld this understanding in the light of the unknowability of absolute truth and of the Godhead beyond names and positive attributes. He regarded negative theology as fundamental.

Martin Luther (d. 1546) frequently referred to the All-Powerful God as hidden, *Deus Absconditus* (hidden God) "in distinction from the *Deus Revelatus* (revealed God) as still a *hidden* God in view of the fact that we cannot fully know Him even through His special revelation."⁵²

Having bypassed many important Christian thinkers due to the limitations of space, we mention a few more recent influential thinkers. Best known for his monumental *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Vladimir Lossky (d. 1958) is widely recognized as having been a preeminent Russian Orthodox *émigré* writer. He considered negative theology (*apophasis*) to be normative in Christian dogmatic reflection.⁵³

The influential Swiss Reformed Protestant theologian Karl Barth (d. 1968), in his incomplete though massive *Church Dogmatics* (1927>), devotes a section to "Limits of the knowledge of God,"⁵⁴ the basic "Hiddenness of God." A useful sketch of the history of the Christian affirmation of the *incomprehensibilitas Dei* is registered. The unknowability of God has a "basic and determinate position" relative to those doctrines surrounding the knowledge of God.⁵⁵

Finally, in this connection it may be noted that in the article "Trinity" in the recent *Encyclopedia of Religion*, the incomprehensibility of God is clearly stated: "First, God is an ineffable and Absolute Mystery, whose reality cannot adequately be comprehended or expressed by means of human concepts."⁵⁶

ISLAM

The Arabic word *alláh* (probably a contraction of *al + iláh*, "the deity") is the Islamic proper name indicative of the Essence of God occurring over 2,500 times in the Qur'an (ca. 610–632). It is basically the same as several of the biblical Hebrew and other Semitic designations of God (e.g., Hebrew: *El, Eloah, Elohím*). According to Gardet, the term *alláh* describes God "in his inaccessible nature as a deity both unique and one (*tawhíd*) whose essence remains unrevealed."⁵⁷ Without bypassing the divine providential immanence, the Qur'an repeatedly underlines God's transcendence. It refers, for example, to God's great exaltation above limited theological and other modes of human understanding. God is "above and beyond all categories of

human thought and imagination, for He is "beyond all that they describe [of Him]." (Q. 6:100b)⁵⁸ He is one who "cannot be comprehended by vision" (Q. 6:101): "Vision comprehendeth Him not, but He comprehendeth [all] vision." God is incomparable: "There is naught like unto Him." (Q. 42:11; cf. 16:60; 32:27) God is supremely "All-High," "Transcendent," or "Exalted" (*al-'altý*). (Q. 4:34; 22:62; 31:30)

In Islamic theosophy and mysticism as well as in Bábí and Bahá'í texts, the Arabic letter "H" (*há'*) is sometimes taken to indicate the divine essence (*al-dhát*) or hiddenness of God and is given a range of qabbalistic, cosmological, and esoteric significances. It is, for example, the first letter of the personal pronoun "He/It is" (*huwa*) and the last letter in the word *alláh* (God).⁵⁹ The Arabic third-person masculine pronoun *huwa* ("He/It [God] is") is many times used of God (*alláh*) in the Qur'an. An extended form of it, *huwiyya* (lit., "He-ness") indicates the divine self-identity or ipseity.⁶⁰ In medieval and later Islamic mysticism, as well as in numerous Bábí and Bahá'í texts, it is used to denote the transcendent divinity or the exalted Manifestation of God.⁶¹ For Shaykh Muwá' al-Dín Ibn al-'Arabí (d. 1270), it indicated the divine Essence: "*huwiyya* ("He-ness") signifies the Unseen Reality" (*al-haqíqat al-ghaybiyya*)⁶²; the "Reality [*al-haqíqat*] in the world of the Unseen."⁶³ In his *Iştiláhát* (Sufi Lexicon), Ibn 'Arabí also interpreted *Hú* (He) to signify "the Unseen [God] (*al-ghayb*) Whom it is not fitting to observe."⁶⁴

There is a section on *huwiyya* ("He-ness") in the important *al-Insán al-kámil* (*The Perfect Man*) of 'Abd al-Karím al-Jílí (d. c. 1428). This Persian Shí'í Sufi writes in this work:

The Ipseity of the True One (God; *huwiyya al-haqq*): this indicates His hiddenness (*ghayb*), the manifestation of which is impossible save by means of the totality of the [Divine] Names and Attributes. This since their Reality alludeth unto the interiority of the Divine Uniqueness (*bá'tín al-wáhidíya*); it alludeth unto His Being (*kun*) and His Essence (*dhát*) by means of His Names and Attributes: "The Ipseity (*al-huwiyya*) is the Hiddenness of the Divine Essence which is Uniquely One (*wáhid*)."⁶⁵

Also related to the Arabic letter *há'* ("h") and *huwa* ("He is") is the designation of the divine Essence, *Láhút* (loosely, "the sphere of the Divine Ipseity"). Traditionally, it lies "above" and "beyond" the ever more elevated succession of spheres or "worlds," (1) *Násút* ("this Mortal World"); (2) *Malakút* ("the world of the angels or the Kingdom

[of God]"); (3) *Jabarút* ("the sphere of the divine decrees or celestial Powers"); (4) *Láhút* ("the realm of the Divine theophany"). The term *Háhút* is modelled on the names of these "realms," which are themselves rooted in Christian Aramaic/Syriac theological terminology.⁶⁶ References to *Háhút* are found in the writings of Muslim theosophical writers and mystics. It indicates the inaccessible sphere of the wholly Other, the divine Essence.

The Qur'an accords God various "Names" as being indicative of the divine perfections. Certain of these quranic "Names of God" are traditionally reckoned among the ninety-nine "Most Beautiful Names [of God]" (*al-asmá' al-ḥusná*, see Q. 20:8). A few of them indicate the divine unknowability, just as others refer to the divine immanence. Of obvious relevance to the former is God's being *al-ghayb* (the Mystery, the Unseen), which occurs a number of times in the Qur'an.⁶⁷ Relevant also is the *hapax legomenon* ("once occurring") and divine attribute, the name *Ṣamad* (loosely, "Impenetrable," "Eternal," "Everlasting"), which occurs only in the centrally important *Súrat al-tawḥíd* (Sura of the Divine Unity, Q. 112:2). The Arabic root S-M-D has the primary meaning "without hollow" or "without cleft," perhaps indicating, as Louis Gardet has recently argued, the divine impenetrability or unknowability.⁶⁸ The same writer has translated the name of God *'azím* as "Inaccessible" (Q. 2:255; 42:4, etc.), indicating one "well beyond the bounds of human understanding, which cannot limit him in any way or compare him to anything."⁶⁹ Qur'an 57:3 not only describes God as the "First and the Last" but also the "Manifest and the Hidden" (*ẓáhir wa'l-báṭin*). While the attribute *ẓáhir* implies the possibility of God's being "disclosed," "manifest," or "outward," *báin* indicates his being "Hidden," "Unmanifest," or "Inward."

It is sometimes reckoned that the supreme or Greatest Name of God (*al-ism al-a'ẓam*) is the "name of God's Essence (*al-Dhát*) as well as of all the Divine Names (*asmá'*) and Qualities (*ṣifát*) as related to and 'contained' in the Divine Nature."⁷⁰ The many attributes of God (*ṣifát Alláh*) are fundamentally appellations and actions of the divinity. From early medieval times, attempts were made to systematize and classify them. The relationship of the various attributes and the essence was much debated. The most basic attribute was *wujúd* (Existence), which has been equated with the *dhát Alláh*, the Essence of God, and with *nafs Alláh* or the Self of God mentioned several times in the Qur'an (Q. 3:28; 6:54; 5:116; 20:41).

Some Muslim theologians, furthermore, have spoken of the "attributes of the Essence" (*ṣifát al-dhát*), which indicate aspects of the divine transcendence (e.g., *qayyúm*, "Self-Subsisting") that are differentiated from other supplementary divine attributes, that is, various divine powers, providence, and immanence. Islamic theologians and philosophers disagreed as to whether the divine attributes are (1) the very Essence—the opinion of various Mu'tazilites and philosophers; (2) something different from the Essence, or (3) neither the Essence nor something different.⁷¹ Shí'í Muslims have often made a sharp distinction between the attributes of the divine *dhát* (Essence) and the other divine attributes they generally understood figuratively. Worth quoting in this connection is Imám 'Alí's declaration: "Absolute unity (*kamál al-tawḥíd*) excludeth all attributes (*al-ṣifát*)."⁷² The same was concluded from Arabic Neoplatonic sources.

In sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and the Twelver Imáms contained in a multitude of Sunní and Shí'í sources, many statements underlining the exalted transcendence or unknowability of God are registered. A well-known prophetic tradition cited by al-Ghazálí (d. 1111) in his *Mishkat al-anwár* (The Niche of Lights) and occasionally referred to by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, has it that: "Before God are 70 [000] veils of Light and Darkness. Should they be unveiled, the Splendours of His Countenance (*subḥát wajhihi*) would assuredly set ablaze all who discern Him with their vision."⁷³ In summing up aspects of Shí'í cosmology, it has been noted that "the essence of the Creator is separated from the creation by veils (*ḥejáb*), curtains (*setr*), and pavilions (*soradeq*) impregnated with the divine attributes."⁷⁴ The inaccessibility and unknowability of God are indirectly expressed in Islamic cosmology in a multitude of different ways.

Among the significant traditions of the Imáms cited by Kulaynī is his *Uṣul al-Káfi* is the following attributed to Abú Ja'far:

Talk together about the creation of God (*khalq Alláh*) but do not talk about God Himself for direct discussion about God increases naught but the bewilderment of the one who indulges in it.

and also:

Talk together about everything but never talk about the Essence of God (*dhát Alláh*).⁷⁵

Neoplatonic influence was evident in Islamic sources from early times. A recension of the last three books of Plotinus's *Enneads*, with some commentary, was translated early on into Arabic and Syriac under the erroneous title "The Theology of Aristotle" (*Uthúlújiyá Aristátáls*). Widely known from the mid-ninth century, the Pseudo-Aristotelian "Theology" was commented upon by early Muslim philosophical theologians, including al-Kindí (d. c. 870) and al-Farábí (d. 950). One of the Arabic Plotinus sources *Fí al-ilm al-iláhi* (On the Divine Science) has it that "whoever wishes to describe the Almighty Creator must remove from Him all attributes."⁷⁶ This is echoed in many Islamic and Bábí-Bahá'í sources.

In addition to the writings of Plotinus, certain works of Porphyry and Proclus were also available in Arabic "as a result of the Hellenistic scholars having taken refuge in Persian courts after Justinian closed the then Neoplatonic Platonic academy at Athens in 529."⁷⁷ As a religious philosophy, Neoplatonism was utilized by Avicenna (Ibn Sina d. 1037), Averroes, and other Islamic theologians and philosophers. It had a significant effect upon major Jewish, Christian, and Islamic medieval philosophers and theologians, many of whom underlined the unknowability of God.⁷⁸

At one point in his *Mishkat al-anwár* (Niche of Lights), the great Muslim theologian Abú Hámid al-Ghazálí (d. 1111) writes that ". . . none knows Allah with a real knowledge but He Himself; for every [thing] known falls necessarily under the sway and within the province of the Knower."⁷⁹ In his article "The Unknowability of God in al-Ghazálí," Burrell writes: "So the upshot of God's unknowability for Ghazali, is to render speculative inquiry into God and the things of God effectively incompatible with the essential human task of responding wholeheartedly to the lure of the One."⁸⁰

The aforementioned Ibn 'Arabí underlined the unknowability and unmanifest nature of the transcendent divine Essence: "The Divine Essence (*al-dhát al-iláhiyya*) cannot be understood by the rational faculty."⁸¹ The divine Essence is transcendent above the cosmos, "independent of the worlds." (Q. 3:97)⁸² The great Shaykh often cited the following prophetic tradition: "Reflect (*tafakkur*) upon all things, but reflect not upon God's Essence."⁸³ Any attempt by human beings to fathom the divine Essence is futile, as implied in the quranic phrase: "God would have you beware of Himself (*nafsihi*)." (Q. 3:28/30)

Chittick sums up key aspects of Ibn 'Arabí's theology when he states: "God is known through the relations, attributions, and correlations that

become established between Him and the cosmos. But the Essence is unknown, since nothing is related to It." Ibn 'Arabí's explanation is:

In respect of Itself the Essence has no name, since It is not the locus of effects, nor is It known by anyone. There is no name to denote It without relationship, nor with any assurance (*tamkín*). For names act to make known and to distinguish, but this door [to knowledge of the Essence] is forbidden to anyone other than God, since "None knows God but God." So the names exist through us and for us. They revolve around us and become manifest within us. Their properties are with us, their goals are toward us, their expressions are of us, and their beginnings are from us. . . . Reflection (*fíkr*) has no governing property or domain in the Essence of the Real, neither rationally nor according to the Law. For the Law has forbidden reflection upon the Essence of God, a point to which is alluded by His words, "God warns you about His Self" (3:28). This is because there is no interrelationship (*munasaba*) between the Essence of the Real and the essence of the creatures.⁸⁴

In our view there is no disputing the fact that the Essence is unknown. To It are ascribed descriptions that make It incomparable with the attributes of temporal things (*al-ḥadath*). It possesses eternity (*al-qidam*), and to Its Being is ascribed beginninglessness (*al-azal*). But all these names designate negations, such as the negation of beginning and everything as appropriate to temporal origination.⁸⁵

According to Walker, nascent Ismá'ílí (Shí'í) philosophy was strongly influenced by Neoplatonic thought: ". . . leading members of the Ismá'ílí sect accepted . . . a considerable dose of neoplatonic theory as a reinforcement for a dogma whose central proposition was the unknowableness of God."⁸⁶ Neoplatonic cosmology and theology seems to have been introduced by the *dá'í* (summoner) al-Nasafí (d. Bukhárá 943), who was influenced by an Arabic recension of Plotinus' *Enneads* in the form of the Pseudo-Aristotelian "Theology."⁸⁷ His ideas were developed by Abú Ya'qúb al-Sijistání (fl. mid. tenth cent.?). For al-Sijistání, the ultimate Godhead is beyond "being" and attributes; the divine Identity (*inníyah*) is far beyond unknowability. Even the logic of apophatic theology is an inadequate indication of the nature of the Godhead. Negative theology is negated before the sublime mystery of the ultimately unknowable; the transcendent Godhead is beyond unknowing. Before the God Who transcends being and non-being is the double negation of the negated:

There does not exist a *tanzih* [transcendence] more brilliant and more splendid than that by which we establish the absolute transcendence of our Originator through the use of these phrases in which a negative and a negative of a negative apply to the thing denied.⁸⁸

Many other Muslim writers, theologians, philosophers, and mystics have, in one way or another, followed a theological *via negativa* and supported the doctrine of the unknowability of God. Among them, Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í (d. 1826) and Sayyid Kázim Rashtí (d. 1844), the twin forerunners of the Báb. The former, at one point in his *Tafsír súrat al-tawhíd* (Commentary on the Súra of the Divine Oneness, [i.e., Q. 112]), for example, gives this key quranic text an apophatically oriented exegesis when he writes:

So God, praised be He, negates from His Attribute (*ifa*) the mode of multiplicity and number through His saying, "He God is One" (112:1). He negates alternation and diminution through His saying, "God is the All-Enduring" (*al-šamad*; 112:2). He negates causation and production (*ilal wa ma'lúl*) through His saying, "He neither begetteth nor is begotton" (112:3). And He negates similarity and contrariety through His saying, "Not any one is comparable to Him" (112:4).⁸⁹

THE WRITINGS OF THE BÁB

There is hardly a major or minor work of the Báb (1819–1850) which does not contain a celebration of the divine transcendence. For the Prophet from Shiraz, the absolute divine Essence (*dhátu'l-dhát*) is "Wholly Other." Numerous exordiums to scores of the Báb's Arabic and Persian compositions contain verses in which the ultimate Godhead is declared beyond the ken of the human mind. So central was the Báb's view of the transcendence of God that he changed the *basmalah*, "In the Name of God the Merciful the Compassionate," to "In the Name of God, the Inaccessible (*al-amna'*), the Most Holy (*al-aqdas*)."⁹⁰ The last two divine attributes of this classical Islamic invocation, present before all but one of the 114 súras of the Qur'an, are replaced with two non-quranic superlatives which indicate that in transcendent holiness the ultimate godhead is set apart.

From the *Qayyumu'l-asmá'* (1844; suras 30, 32, 33, etc.) to the *Kitábu'l-asmá'* (Book of Names; late 1840s), the phrase: "There is naught like unto Him [God]" (Q. 42:11b) is frequently quoted in the

writings of the Báb. The central theological importance of apophatic theology is, for example, indicated in the Báb's *Sáhifay-i 'adliyya* (Equitable Tract; early 1847?). In the third section of this seminal Persian work headed "On the knowledge of God (*ma'rifat Alláh*) and the knowledge of His saints," it is stated that the basis of religion is the knowledge of God (*ma'rifat Alláh*), the perfection of which is the knowledge of the divine unity (*tawhíd*). This demands the negation of the divine names and attributes from the sanctified divine essence (*dhát-i muqaddas*), for the perfection of apophasis (negation) is the appearance of the Manifestation of God who is the locus of the divine Oneness (*aḥadiyya*) around whom the divine names and attributes revolve.

What follows are a few notes on selected writings of the Báb which are not wholly in strict chronological order and which contain testimonies to the incomprehensibility of God and related theological issues.

Commentary on a Phrase Within the Dawn Prayer. Among the minor though significant works of the Báb is his *Tafsír du'a al-šabáh*, a commentary on a phrase within a dawn prayer ascribed to Imám 'Alí (d. 661), the cousin, son-in-law, and successor of the Prophet Muhammad.⁹¹ The phrase commented upon is from a supplication in which God is addressed as the One Who, "the proof of Thine Essence is furnished through Thine Essence (*dalla 'alá dhátihi bi-dhátihi*)."⁹² This phrase is cited quite frequently in Bábí–Bahá'í scripture. The transcendent divine essence is really only adequately testified to by its own self. Only God can comprehend God's "Essential Reality" (*dhátiyyat*) for the "bird" of the human "heart" has, for all eternity, been unable to "ascend" unto the domain of His mystery. Knowledge/*gnosis* of the eternal divine essence is impossible and inaccessible.⁹³ The transcendence and unknowability of God is quite frequently underlined in this work of the Báb.

*Commentary on the Tradition of the [Divine] Cloud (Ḥadīth al-'amá').*⁹⁴ A hadith has it that the Prophet Muhammad was asked, "Where was our Lord before He created the creation?" He is said to have replied, "He [God] was in a Cloud (*'amá'*), above it [or Him] air (*hawá'*) and below it [or Him] air." This reply probably originally expressed the conviction that God was hidden and self-subsisting in his own Being. It indicates that before God's work of creation, God was in obscurity, enshrouded in the cloud of his own Being, wrapped in a dark mist.

The Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were both significantly influenced by this tradition and its interpretation in theosophical Sufism—Bahá'u'lláh's earliest extant work is entitled *Rashh-i 'Amá'* ("The Sprinkling of the Divine Cloud," 1269/late 1852). The term 'amá' (loosely, "cloud") is quite frequent in their writings. In Bábí–Bahá'í scripture, as in Sufi interpretations, it is sometimes indicative of the hidden and unknowable Essence of God.

In one of his early epistles, the Báb comments in some detail on the "tradition of 'amá'":⁹⁵ "God was in 'amá' (a "cloud") above it air and below it air." He states that this tradition indicates God's isolated independence. The term *al-'amá'* ("the Cloud") only inadequately indicates the divine *dhát* ("essence").⁹⁶ In his interpretation, the Báb seems to underline God's absolute otherness to such an extent that the term 'amá' only indirectly hints at His transcendent unknowability. God's *nafs* ("Self") and *dhát* ("Essence") are probably thought to be created and hypostatic realities indicative of, yet ontologically distinguishable from, God's uncreated and absolute Ipseity. For the Báb, 'amá' indicates God's absolute otherness. It is derived from *al-'aml* or *al-'amán* ("blindness," "unknowing"), for vision is blinded before God's Face and eyes are incapable of beholding God's Countenance.

For the Báb, the *Ḥadīth* of 'Amá' also enshrines the mysteries surrounding the Sinaitic theophany (Q. 7:143). It was not the eternal unknowable Essence of God (*dhātu'l-azal*) that appeared in the celestial realm of 'amá' (*malakútu'l-'amá'*) and radiated forth through the divine light on Mount Sinai but an *amr* (lit. "command"; "Logos") which God created from nothing. The theophany on the Mount was not the manifestation of 'amá' as God's absolute essence—not a monistic type "theophany or the Divine Essence" (*tajallī al-dhát*)—but the disclosure of the divine Light (*núr*) unto, through, and in God's Self (*nafs*), the Manifestation of God. The Báb clarifies his interpretation of the modes of the divine theophany including the "theophany of the Divine Essence" (*tajallī al-dhát*) found in certain Sufi treatises.⁹⁷ Such a theophany does not involve a manifestation of the divine Essence understood as a "cloud" or anything else.

Letter to Mírzá Ḥasan Waqáyi'-nigár. In a letter addressed to Mírzá Ḥasan Waqáyi'-nigár, the Báb comments upon various quranic texts including the quranic phrase, "We [God; the Divine] are nearer to him [the human being] than his jugular vein (*ḥabl al-warīd*)."⁹⁸ At the very beginning of his commentary, the Báb underlines the utter

Singleness, Isolatedness, Transcendence, and Unknowability of the divine Essence (*al-dhát*). God has eternally "detached" the divine "Names and Attributes" from referring to the "court" of God's transcendent "Presence" (*ḥadratīhi*). They apply primarily to God's "Will" (*al-mashiyyat*). Nearness to the divine essence is impossible except by virtue of the theophany (*tajallī*) of God's "Self" (*nafs*), the locus of God's "Will," and of the Messenger or Manifestation of God. Qur'an 50:16b alludes to the "sign of God" (*áyat Alláh*) which is found within the inmost human reality, which is, symbolically speaking, the depths of the human "heart" (*fú'ád*).⁹⁹

Commentary on the Night of Power (Tafīr Laylatu'l-Qadr). Probably dating from the time of the Báb's imprisonment in Ádhirbayján (1848–49), the "Commentary on the Night of Power" is a succinct commentary on a phrase in sura 97 (*Súratu'l-qadr*) of the Qur'an. The sublimity of God's *dhátiyyat* (Essential Reality) is early on declared transcendent above "all things" (*kull shay'*). The Báb indicated that no praise is more lofty than praise of God and no eulogium more splendid (*abhá*) than that of the divine Being. Human beings only inadequately testify to the "Divinity" (*uluhiyya*) and "Lordship" (*rububiyya*) of the transcendent God Who is beyond human comprehension.¹⁰⁰

*A Verse of the Sermon of the Gulf (Khuṭba al-ṭutunjiyya).*¹⁰¹ The direct vision of the absolute divine Essence is not regarded as possible in either Bábí or Bahá'í scripture. In a sermon ascribed to Imám 'Alí known as the (loosely) "Sermon of the Gulf," the Imám at one point declares, "I saw God (*ráytú'lláh*) and Paradise through the vision of the eye (*ráyu'l-'ayn*)." Taken literally, this statement is highly controversial.¹⁰² In his epistle known as *al-Lawámi' al-badl'* (The Wondrous Brilliances, 1846/7), the Báb interpreted it to refer to Imám 'Alí's inner "vision of the Primal Will of God" (*ru'yatu'l-mashiyya*) and not a direct vision of the transcendent Deity.¹⁰³ In the previously referred to commentary on the *Du'a al-sabáh* (Dawn Prayer), the same passage from the *Khuṭba al-ṭutunjiyya* is quoted and interpreted in terms of the "vision of the Divine Theophany" (*ru'yat al-tajallī*), understood as a divine Manifestation not a disclosure of the divine Essence.¹⁰⁴

Persian and Arabic Bayáns (Expositions). Both the Persian and Arabic *Bayáns* (Expositions) of the Báb contain clear statements about the transcendence and incomprehensibility of the Godhead.

Some key theological issues are set down in the first two *bábs* (gates) of the fourth *Wáhid* (Unity) of the Persian *Bayán*. The Persian *Bayán* IV:2 discusses the two stations (*maqámayn*) of the *Nuqta* (Point) or “Sun of Truth” (*shams-i haqíqat*; Manifestation of God). The first station is that of his being the divine Manifestation (*mazhar-i iláhiyya*), representative of the *ghayb-i dhát* (Unseen Essence). As the voice of the *ghayb-i dhát*, the Báb articulates a divinely revealed negative theology:

... He is One Indescribable by any description; One Who cannot be characterized by any depiction. Supremely Transcendent (*muta’áll*) is He above any mention or praise—sanctified beyond both pristine whiteness (*káfúr*; lit., camphor) and the acme of actualization (*jawhar imdádí*). It is impossible that He be comprehended by anyone other than Himself or for anyone other than He Himself to be united with Him. His is the creation and the Command. No God is there except Him, the One, the All-Powerful, the Transcendent.¹⁰⁵

The second *báb* of the fourth *Wáhid* makes it clear that, God being unknowable, the “Point” (*nuqta*; Manifestation of God) as the center of the divine Will (*mashíyya*) is the locus of all theological statements. The Báb maintains that the “essence of this section (*báb*)” is that the eternal divine Essence (*dhát-i azal*) has ever been and will ever remain incomprehensible, indescribable, and beyond characterization and human vision.¹⁰⁶

The Seven Proofs (Dalá’il-i Sab’ih). Addressed perhaps to a Shaykhí (and Bábí?), the Persian *Dalá’il-i sab’ih* opens with a testimony to God’s uniqueness, eternity, and unknowability. In the light of his claim to be the Qá’im, a shift in the Báb’s eschatological views can be seen in the *Dalá’il-i sab’ih*. His earlier futurist though imminent eschatological perspective begins to be transformed into a partly realized or inaugurated eschatological stance. Traditional apocalyptic and other expected latter-day “signs” central to Shí’í messianism are given, in the light of their proposed fulfilment, non-literal interpretations.¹⁰⁷ The eschatological “meeting with God” (*liqá’u’lláh*; see Qur’an 13:2, etc.) is not a literal coming into the presence of the eternal divine essence (*dhát-i azal*), but the meeting with the divine manifestation of God (*mazhar-i haqíqat*), with, in fact, the Báb on the mount of Mákú or wherever he resides.¹⁰⁸

Apart from underlining the transcendence and unknowability of the essence of God, the Báb also emphasized the presence of the “Day of God” through his manifestation. He frequently claimed (secondary) divinity and also bestowed it upon others. There exist writings of the Báb cited by Bahá’u’lláh in his *Lawḥ-i sarráj* (c. 1867) which make it clear that a pleroma of Bábis shared in his eschatological divinity (*al-ulúhiyya*) and Lordship (*al-rubúbiyya*). He stated that God conferred “divinity” and “Lordship” upon whomsoever he pleased.¹⁰⁹ He never compromised, however, the absolute otherness and transcendent unknowability of the divine Essence.

THE BAHÁ’Í SCRIPTURE

As with Bábí scripture, the Bahá’í texts are strictly monotheistic, or rather supra-monotheistic in the sense that the essence of God lies far beyond any notion of numerical oneness, let alone multiplicity.¹¹⁰ The doctrine of *tawhíd* (the divine Oneness) is uncompromisingly upheld. There is no place for anthropomorphism, anthropopathism,¹¹¹ pantheism, or any vision of or *unio mystica* with the unknowable godhead. Bahá’u’lláh understood *tawhíd* (the Oneness of God) in a variety of ways. Its primary significance is the complete transcendence of God:

Regard thou the one true God (*haqq*) 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 (*tawhíd*).¹¹²

Tablet of All Food (Lawḥ-i kullu’t-ṭa’ám). Bahá’u’lláh’s early “Tablet of All Food” (c. 1854) is basically a mystical commentary upon Qur’an 3:87, which, as he explains, has “subtle meanings infinite in their infinitude.” Towards the beginning of this tablet the mystical significance of food (*ṭa’ám*) is related to the hierarchy of metaphysical realms well known in theosophical Sufism and mentioned below. Following Islamic mystical cosmology, Bahá’u’lláh mentions the *‘arshu’l-háhút* (“the Throne of He-ness/Ipseity”) related to the “Paradise of the divine oneness” (*jannatu’l-aḥadiyya*). None, not even Bahá’u’lláh himself, can expound the mysteries of even a letter of the unfathomable mysteries of Qur’an 3:87 relative to this sphere. The sphere of the unknowable Essence is “Wholly Other.”

The Seven Valleys (Haft vādī). In the fourth of the Seven Valleys (c. 1857–58), the “Valley of Unity” (*vādī-i tawhīd*), Bahá’u’lláh counters an anthropomorphic understanding of the experience of the divine and underlines the divine transcendence and unknowability:

... let none construe these utterances to be anthropomorphism (*ḥulūl*), nor see in them the descent of the worlds of God into the grades of the creatures. . . . For God is, in His Essence (*bi-dhātihi muqaddas*), holy above ascent and descent, entrance and exit; He hath through all eternity been free of the attributes of human creatures (*ṣifāt-i khalq*), and ever will remain so. No man hath ever known Him; no soul hath ever found the pathway to His Being. Every mystic knower (*urufā*) hath wandered far astray in the valley of the knowledge (*vādī ma’rifatish*) of Him; every saint (*awli-wá*) hath lost his way in seeking to comprehend His Essence (*dhátish*). Sanctified is He above the understanding (*irfán*) of the wise (*árif*); exalted is He above the knowledge of the knowing! The way is barred and to seek it is impiety; His proof is His signs; His being is His evidence.

Wherefore, the lovers of the face of the Beloved have said [words of Imám ‘Alí]: “O Thou, the One Whose Essence alone showeth the way to His Essence (*dalla ‘alá dhátihi bi-dhātihi*), and Who is sanctified above any likeness to His creatures.” How can utter nothingness gallop its steed in the field of preexistence, or a fleeting shadow reach to the everlasting sun? The Friend hath said, “But for Thee, we had not known Thee,” and the Beloved hath said, “nor attained Thy presence.”¹¹³

The Hidden Words (Kalimát-i maknúnih). The sixty-sixth Arabic Hidden Word (c. 1858) is addressed, in language reminiscent of that of al-Jílí, to the “children of the Divine and Invisible Essence” (*al-huwiyya al-ghayb*). Humanity is reminded of the incomprehensibility and inaccessibility of the ultimate divinity.

Ye shall be hindered from loving Me and souls shall be perturbed as they make mention of Me. For minds (*al-‘aql*) cannot grasp Me not hearts (*al-qulúb*) contain Me.¹¹⁴

Commentary on the “He is” (Tafsír-i Hú [Huwa]).¹¹⁵ Bahá’u’lláh wrote a highly theosophical “Commentary on the phrase ‘He is’” (c. 1859), which was evidently written soon after “The Hidden Words” (*Kalimat-i maknúnih* c. 1858), one of which (Arabic No. 3) is cited and interpreted.¹¹⁶ It contains many noteworthy theological statements about the divine Identity (*huwa*, “He-ness”), “Essence” (*dhát*), Names

(*asmá*), and Attributes (*ṣifát*). It was written mainly to explain a passage from a writing of the Báb (or other) and addressed to a “Mirror” (*mirát*) of the Bábí dispensation, probably Mírzá Yahyá.¹¹⁷ The issue of the relationship of the “Mirror,” the divine Names and Attributes, the “Most Beautiful Names” (*al-asmá’ al-ḥusná*), and the divine Identity (Arabic: *huwa*= “He is,” Persian: *Hú*) is central to the commentary.

Bahá’u’lláh presents the Manifestation of God as the locus of the Names and Attributes of God and the vehicle through which the unknowable Essence, which is beyond the “Most Beautiful Names” (*al-asmá’ al-ḥusná*), communicates with creation. While the totality of the divine “Names” (*al-asmá*) revolve around the “Divine Will” (*mashiyya*), all the divine “Attributes” (*al-ṣifát*) are realized through God’s “Intention” (*irada*). Everything circumambulates the divine and unfathomable Essence (*dhát*) whose theophany (manifestation; *tajallí*) is realized through the major prophets or Manifestations. The Báb is referred to as the “Fountainhead of His Essence” (*manba’ al-dhātihi*) and the “Locus of His Activity” (Source of His Action; *maṣdar f’ihi*).

The divinely revealed verse commented upon indicates that all the divine Names (*al-asmá*) are concentrated in the expression “all things” (*kullu shay’*), which were subsequently compacted or limited within the divine name “He is” (*huwa*). In Arabic, *huwa* is composed of the two letters “H” (*há*) and “W” (*wáw*), which are indicative of its “inner” and “outer” dimensions respectively. The inner dimension of the divine Identity is expressed in the phrases: “hiddenness of the Ipseity” (*ghayb al-huwiyya*), “interiority of the divine Oneness” (*sirr al-ahadiyya*), and the “primordial, pristine divine Essence” (*al-dhát al-bahta al-qadíma*). When the hidden “H” is established upon the “enthroned, eternal Temple” (*al-haykal al-‘arshiyya al-azaliyya*), “the beauty of the divine Ipseity” (*jamálu’l-huwiyya*) is established in the “Luminous Temple” (*haykalu’l-núriyya*) of the Manifestation of God. God made his name “He is” (*huwa*) the greatest of the divine designations, for it is a “Mirror” (*mirát*) of all the divine Names (*al-asmá*) and Attributes (*al-ṣifát*).

Unlike the divine Names and Attributes whose manifestation accounts for all earthly and heavenly things, the reality of the divine Essence is not in its very Self (*al-dhát bi’l-dhātihi*) manifested unto a single thing. Neither is it grasped or comprehended by anything. It is guarded from the comprehension of God’s creatures and immeasurably beyond the *gnosis* of God’s servants. Experiential knowledge of the divine Essence (*ma’rifat dhātihi*) is impossible.

'Abdu'l-Bahá' wrote a number of important tablets in explanation of *huwa Alláh* (He is God), an expression that is not only found several times in the Qur'an (e.g., Q. 28:70) but also is widely used in Islam. As in the *Tafsír-i Hú*, his explanation focuses on the doctrine of the unknowability of God. One tablet written in reply to the question why the epithet "He is God" is frequently written at the beginning of Bahá'í scriptural tablets (*alwáh*) begins by acknowledging its use in the Orient and its customary prefixing to Bábí and Bahá'í tablets. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that it indicates the incomprehensibility of the one, divine Essence (*ḥaqíqat-i-dhát-i-aḥadiyyat*), which is beyond conceptualization. It further indicates the "Beauty of the Promised One" Who is the "Sun of Reality" as the manifest Divinity (i.e., Bahá'u'lláh) in allusion to whose name 'Abdu'l-Bahá commences his writings.¹¹⁸

Another tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to a Western Bahá'í reads:

O Thou who art firm in the Covenant!

Thou hast asked regarding the phrase "He is God!" written above the Tablets. By this Word it is intended that no one hath any access to the Invisible Essence. The way is barred and the road impassable. In this world all men must turn their faces toward "Him-whom-God-shall-Manifest." He is the "Dawning-place of Divinity" and the "Manifestation of Deity." He is the "Ultimate Goal," and the "Adored One" of all and the "Worshipped One" of all. Otherwise, whatever flashes through the mind is not that Essence of essences and the Reality of realities; nay, rather, is it pure imagination woven by man and is surrounded, not the surrounding. Consequently, it returns finally to the realm of suppositions and conjectures.¹¹⁹

"He is" (*huwa*) signifies that human beings must turn indirectly to God through the Manifestation. The ultimate deity, the Essence of essences, cannot become an object of direct identification.

Tablet of the City of the Divine Oneness (Lawḥ-i madīnatu'l-tawḥíd). This centrally important tablet (c. 1858) is one of the cornerstones of any systematic Bahá'í theology. It begins with Bahá'u'lláh's categorical and repeated assertion of the transcendent incomprehensibility of God:

Praise be to God, the All-Possessing, the King of incomparable glory, a praise which is immeasurably above the understanding of all created things, and is exalted beyond the grasp of the minds of men. None else besides Him hath ever been able to sing adequately His praise, nor will any man succeed at any time in describing the full measure of His glory.

Who is it that can claim to have attained the heights of His exalted Essence, and what mind can measure the depths of His unfathomable mystery? . . .

. . . So perfect and comprehensive is His creation that no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. The conceptions of the devoutest of mystics, the attainments of the most accomplished amongst men, the highest praise which human tongue or pen can render are all the product of man's finite mind and are conditioned by its limitations. Ten thousand Prophets, each a Moses, are thunderstruck upon the Sinai of their search at His forbidding voice, "Thou shalt never behold Me!"; whilst a myriad Messengers, each as great as Jesus, stand dismayed upon their heavenly thrones by the interdiction, "Mine Essence thou shalt never apprehend!" From time immemorial He hath been veiled in the ineffable sanctity of His exalted Self, and will everlastingly continue to be wrapt in the impenetrable mystery of His unknowable Essence. Every attempt to attain to an understanding of His inaccessible Reality hath ended in complete bewilderment, and every effort to approach His exalted Self and envisage His Essence hath resulted in hopelessness and failure.¹²⁰

This key tablet further clarifies that the doctrine of *tawḥíd* (the Divine Oneness) is no mere abstract theological proposition. Its affirmation involves regarding God and the Manifestation of God as "One and the same" in purpose, but not in essence. Trinitarian consubstantiality is frequently rejected in Bábí and Bahá'í scripture. In its Bahá'í interpretation, *tawḥíd* enshrines the central Bahá'í teaching of the oneness of the Manifestations of God.

The Essence of the Mysteries (Jawáhiru'l-asrár). Written in response to a number of written questions about the expected Muslim messiah (the Mahdí) posed by Sayyid Yúsuf-i Sidihí Isfáhání, about a year before the composition of the *Kitáb-i Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh's *Jawáhiru'l-Asrár* (c. 1860–61) also touches on the question of the transcendent unknowability of God. This work is closely related to the earlier *Seven Valleys (Haft vádí*, c. 1858) and contains a discussion of the "stations (*maqámát*) of the spiritual path (*as-sulúk*)." In the fourth stage, the "City of the Divine Unity" (*madīnatu'l-tawḥíd*), Bahá'u'lláh explains that God was never manifested in his own Being (*kaynúníyya*) or essential Reality (*dhátíyya*) since God was "eternally hidden in the

ancient Eternity of His Essence." This, until God decided to send Messengers to manifest his Beauty in the "Kingdom of Names."¹²¹

The Book of Certitude (Kitáb-i Íqán). Key theological passages in the *Kitáb-i Íqán* (1862) clearly maintain that "the door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days" (*dhát-i-azal*; the ultimate godhead) is "closed in the face of all beings."¹²²

To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence (*ghayb-i huwiyya*), the divine Being (*dhát-i ahadiyya-i muqaddas*), is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men. "No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving [Q. 6:103]."¹²³

As in the Báb's *Dalá'il-i sab'ih* (Seven Proofs), the *Kitáb-i Íqán* interprets the eschatological *liqá'u'lláh* (meeting with God) non-literally. In the light of the transcendence of the divine Essence, it cannot be other than meeting the Manifestation of God in faith.¹²⁴

The passages reviewed above, which are largely from early titled tablets, all have apophatic theological dimensions and date from the first decade of Bahá'u'lláh's ministry (1853–63). Numerous other relevant texts from these early years as well as the subsequent three decades cannot be discussed in detail here. We now turn to a brief exposition of the doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi.

THE WRITINGS OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

In addition to the commentaries referred to above, numerous theological expositions were written by Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921). When asked to what extent the human being can comprehend God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that there are two kinds of knowledge: (1) "knowledge of the essence of a thing (*ma'rifat-i dhát-i shay'*)" and (2) "the knowledge of its qualities [or attributes] (*ma'rifat-i shifát-i shay'*)."¹²⁵ The knowledge of the inner essence of anything is

impossible, although it can be known by its attributes. God can only be known indirectly through the divine attributes focused on the Manifestation of God: "It is certain that the Divine Reality (*haqiqat-i rubúbiyyat*) is unknown with regard to its essence (*dhát*) and is known with regard to its attributes (*shifát*)."¹²⁶

In a tablet to the Swiss entomologist Dr. Auguste Forel (d. 1931), 'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterated the theological principle that God is beyond known attributes. The following excerpt has a definite apophatic theological dimension:

As to the attributes (*shifát*) and perfections (*kamálát*) such as will ("intention" *irádih*), knowledge and power and other ancient attributes that we ascribe to that Divine Reality (*haqiqat-i láhútiyyih*), these are the signs that reflect the existence of beings in the visible plane and not the Absolute Perfection of the Divine Essence (*haqiqat-i ulúhiyya*) that cannot be comprehended. . . . Thus we say His attributes are unknowable. . . . The purpose is to show that these attributes and perfections that we recount for that Universal Reality (*haqiqat-i kulliyya*) are only in order to deny [or negate] imperfections (*salb-i naqá'is*), rather than to assert [or affirm] perfections (*thubut-i kamálát*) that the human mind can conceive. Thus we say His attributes are unknowable.¹²⁷

For 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the divine names and attributes are not posited to prove the divine perfections but rather in order to disprove imperfections.¹²⁸ The names and attributes of God revolve around and are perfectly mirrored in the Messenger or Manifestation of God:

. . . all that the human reality knows, discovers and understands of the names (*asma'*), the attributes (*shifát*) and the perfections (*kamálát*) of God refer to these Holy Manifestations [of God] (*shazáhir-i muqadassih*). There is no access to anything else: "the way is barred and seeking forbidden . . . for the essential names and attributes of God (*asma' va shifát-i dhátiyya-i iláhiyya*) are identical with His Essence (*'ayn-i dhát*), and His Essence is above all comprehension. . . . Accordingly all these names, praises and eulogies apply to the Places of Manifestation; and all that we imagine and suppose besides them is mere imagination, for we have no means of comprehending that which is invisible and inaccessible."¹²⁹

It should also be noted that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, indirectly clarifying an aspect of Bahá'í cosmology when explaining the significance of the Greatest Name (*al-ism al-a'zam*, i.e., Bahá'), spoke of three "worlds": (1) the inaccessible world of the True One (Divine Essence, *'alam-i*

ḥaqq), which is the source of emanated reality; (2) the “world of the Divine Command” or sphere of the Manifestation(s) of God (*‘ālam-i amr*), in which the divine attributes are mirrored; and (3) the world(s) of creation (*‘ālam-i khalq*).¹³⁰

SHOGHI EFFENDI

Shoghi Effendi (c. 1896–1957), the great-grandson of Bahá’u’lláh and head of the Bahá’í religion for thirty-six years, authored thousands of authoritative expositions of Bahá’í doctrine. In his compilation of selected English-language translations from tablets of the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith entitled *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* (1st ed. 1935), he opened this volume with a lengthy supplication addressed to a certain Áqá Muhammad Ḥasan that expressed God’s immeasurable exaltation above human attempts to “unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory or even hint at the nature of Thine Essence.”¹³¹

Among the most important works of Shoghi Effendi is *The Dispensation of Bahá’u’lláh* (1937). Therein, the authoritative Bahá’í view of the station of the central figures of the Bahá’í Faith is lucidly set out. Anthropomorphism, incarnationism, and pantheism are rejected in the light of the divine transcendence and unknowability. Though a divine being and a complete “incarnation of the Names and Attributes of God,” Bahá’u’lláh should ever remain entirely distinguished from the ultimate Godhead—that “invisible yet rational God Who, however much we extol the divinity of His Manifestations on earth, can in no wise incarnate His infinite, His unknowable, His incorruptible and all-embracing Reality in the concrete and limited frame of a mortal being.”¹³²

Clarifying a fundamental aspect of Bahá’í theology, Shoghi Effendi also states in this work that Bahá’u’lláh should be regarded as no more than a Manifestation of God, “never to be identified with that invisible Reality, the Essence of Divinity itself.” This, he remarks, is “one of the major beliefs of our Faith,”¹³³ which should neither be obscured nor compromised.

Shoghi Effendi’s interpretation of the doctrine of the unknowability of God is indirectly expressed in a letter written through his secretary in 1929. Therein, Shoghi Effendi cites ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as having made a distinction between the standpoint of “gnostics” and “religionists”:

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the main difference between the gnostics and the religionists is that the gnostics maintain the existence of only two worlds, the world of God and the world of the creature. The prophets however, maintained the existence of three worlds [1] the world of God, [2] the world of the Will or the Word, and [3] the world of created things. The prophets, therefore, maintained that a knowledge of God is impossible. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says man can never know God or even imagine Him. If he does that object is not God but an imaginary idol.¹³⁴

Shoghi Effendi did not, however, maintain that Bahá’í negative theology should rule out a personal relationship with God through the Manifestation or messenger. In a tablet to a Western Bahá’í, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá responded to the assertion of the “Impersonality of Divinity” by stating that the “Personality is in the Manifestation of the Divinity, not in the Essence of Divinity.”¹³⁵ Bahá’í scripture does not speak of the so-called “Persons” (*aqnûm*) of the ultimate divinity. No exact theology of the “personality” of the ultimate Godhead exists in Bahá’í sacred scripture, although the doctrine of the human “individual reality” (*ḥaqīqat-i shákhiṣih*) and the “distinct personality” (*shakhṣiyyat-i makḥṣûsih*) of the Manifestation of God, defined as the “rational soul” (*nafs-i nátiqih*), is definitely taught.¹³⁶

In 1939, Shoghi Effendi wrote a letter explaining that the Bahá’í notion of a “personal God” rules out God being considered “an unconscious and determined force operating in the universe,” as some scientists and materialists suppose. The “personal God,” he explained, is not an anthropomorphic deity but a Godhead “beyond human comprehension,” which, having a “Mind,” “Will,” and “Purpose,” is “conscious of His creation.”¹³⁷ The supreme Being is beyond names and attributes and is “Wholly Other.” This being is “suprapersonal” in terms of its essence though not absolutely abstracted from creation, for which God has conceived a purpose. God is, quite definitely “personal” by virtue of the divinity and humanity of the Messenger through whom the divine providence is operative. A personal relationship with God through the Manifestation may be intimate, loving, and heartfelt. Humanity may achieve the depths of nearness to God and something of the infinite knowledge of God through the mediating Messenger and the study and experience of his sacred writings.

The foregoing sketch of the numerous Bábí and Bahá’í testimonies to the incomprehensibility of God is not intended to leave a mere theological vacuum. A key point to be noted is that the

apophatically oriented Bahá'í doctrine of the incomprehensibility of the godhead does not totally depersonalize the relationship between God and humankind. By virtue of the Messenger or Manifestation of God, a cataphatic (affirmative) theology makes God intimately personal. Human proximity to the supreme Being is an eternal spiritual possibility.¹³⁸ In Bahá'í scripture, there is a fundamental emphasis upon the cataphatic or affirmative theology of the Manifestation of God. The Bahá'í apophatic or negative theology does not eclipse the all-important cataphatic theology of the Messenger or Manifestation of God.

CONCLUSION

This article is but a partial register of the numerous religious and philosophical testimonies to the unknowability and incomprehensibility of God. From at least the beginning of the common era, apophatic theological/philosophical statements become increasingly numerous within the Abrahamic and non-Semitic-Asian religions. Such statements have come to have a major place within Bábí-Bahá'í scripture. Analysis of the implications of apophatic theological statements can be, moreover, spiritually and intellectually rewarding.

One can adore and worship God in and for his transcendence. Apophasis, as humble unknowing, might be experienced by one who becomes conscious of the sublime mystery of God and the Manifestation of God. It might be said to involve sensible bewilderment before the divine Beloved: "To merit the madness of love man must abound in sanity."¹³⁹ Ideally, to approach the All-Knowing, the aspirant must be full of that humble self-negation that is the ecstasy of unknowing. Consciousness of God's sublime and lofty unknowability is not the realization of an obscure vacuity—a theological "black hole"—but a cause of mystic religious exhilaration: "O Lord, Increase my astonishment (*tahayyir*) at Thee!"¹⁴⁰

Bahá'ís can supplicate God and experience the profound mysteriousness of the Ultimate Divinity. They can experience the tremendous mystery of the divine Manifestation who also has unknowable dimensions; who is a "Beauty" veiled in oceans of Light: "His beauty hath no veiling save light, His face no covering save revelation."¹⁴¹ Awe before the unfathomable, the ultimate divinity in a state of humble "unknowing" can be a profound mystical experience. It is not born

out of ignorance or anti-intellectualism, but rather out of a loving openness to the sublime. A realization of the namelessness, genderlessness, awe-inspiring "Wholly Other" may be a source of religious exhilaration and unity. God is unknowable but not at all remote. God's knowability is centered around the Manifestation who is the locus of the divine Names and Attributes. Nearness to the Messenger is nearness to God. Knowledge of God's revelation is the knowledge of God.

The doctrine of the unknowability of the Transcendent is one of the teachings the major world religions have in common. The consciousness that God is "Wholly Other" could be regarded as an important pathway within interreligious dialogue. In his comparative study *Knowing the Unknowable God*, Burrell argues that the received doctrine of God in the West was "an intercultural, interfaith achievement."¹⁴² The Muslim Avicenna influenced the Jew Maimonides, and both influenced the Christian, Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas. Perhaps a fresh appreciation of this mutual theological common ground would inspire a greater sense of religious unity amongst contemporary seekers of the Transcendent.

Michael Sells begins his article "Apophasis in Plotinus" by asking "Is apophasis dead? Can there be a contemporary apophatic theology, or critical method, or approach to comparative religion and interreligious dialogue? If such approaches are possible, then a resource of virtually unfathomable richness lies largely untapped. I suggest that apophasis has much to offer contemporary thought and that, in turn, classical apophasis can be critically reevaluated from the perspective of contemporary concerns."¹⁴³ Bahá'í philosophers and theologians might be well advised to take up Sells' focus on apophasis as a path to interreligious dialogue and unity.

This essay has done no more than selectively map out something of our rich apophatic theological heritage. It remains for Bahá'ís and other theologians to fulfil this task more adequately and contribute to a global apophatic theology in which the unknowable is loved and appreciated for his transcendent Mystery as well as for the Person of the Messenger or Manifestation of God.

NOTES

1. See V. Kesich, "Via Negativa," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 15, ed. by M. Eliade, et al. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) pp. 253f.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i Íqán* (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1980) p. 74; *Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, trans. by Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1961) p. 64.
3. The terms *apophatic* (negative) and *cataphatic* (positive) to indicate a theology seem to have been first used in the Christian world by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (f.c. 500 CE).
4. H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (London: SPCK, 1966) p. 39.
5. See, for example, the trisagion, Isaiah 6:3.
6. Geza Vermes, trans. *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (N.c.: Pelican Books, n.d.) p. 70.
7. *The Via-Negativa in Jewish Religious Thought* (New York: Judaica Press, 1967) p. 38.
8. Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition, From Plato to Denys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981) p. 19.
9. Mut. II:7, 10.
10. Opif. 71; Abr. 74-6.
11. Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973) pp. 47-48.
12. Baya ibn Pakuda, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, trans. from Arabic by Menahem Mansoor (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) p. 143; cf. Jacobs, *Jewish Theology*, p. 39f.
13. Guide LVIII, Moses Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, trans. by Friedländer (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) p. 83.
14. G. Scholem, "God" (In Kabbalah) in *Encyclopædia Judaica*. Vol. 7 (Jerusalem: Keter Pub. House, 1972) p. 661.
15. According to Acts 17:23, Paul referred to an altar with the inscription "To an unknown God" (*agnóstó theó*) though it is unlikely, as has been argued, that this is a reference to the unknown God spoken about in gnostic texts (E. Norden, *Agnostos Theos* [Leipzig, 1913]; cf. T. Rajak, "The Unknown God" in *Journal of Jewish Studies*, Vol. 29 [1978] pp. 20-29).
16. D. W. Palmer, "Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century" in *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 37 (1983) p. 224; see R. M. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (London: SPCK, 1988).
17. Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture: A History of Christian Doctrine before the Council of Nicea*, Vol. II (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973) p. 323f; cf. the Christian apologists uses of "invisible," "impalpable," "impassible," "uncontainable."
18. E. Hennecke, *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. by W. Schneemelcher. Vol. 2 (London: SCM, 1965) p. 99; cf. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6, p. 19.

19. J. Zandee Zandee, "Gnostic Ideas of the Fall and Salvation" in *Numen*, Vol. 11 (1964) p. 21.
20. See J. M. Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library in English* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984) p. 99ff.
21. G. Quispel, "The Jung Codex and its Significance" in *The Jung Codex: A Newly Recovered Gnostic Papyrus*, ed. by F. M. Cross (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1955) p. 57.
22. *Apologia* II.5, cited in H. Bettenson, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969) p. 63.
23. Dial. 128.
24. Suppl. 10.1, cited in G. L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952) p. 3.
25. *Ad. Aut.* I.3; cited in Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought*.
26. *Adv. Haer.* IV.20.6, cited in Bettenson, *Early Christian Fathers*, p. 75.
27. Strom V 11:74.4, cited in Daniélou, *Gospel Message*, p. 326.
28. Clement, Strom V.12.82, etc.
29. De Prin. I.1.5.
30. *Ibid.*, IV.4.8; I.1.5f.
31. Mary T. Clark, "Plotinus" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 11 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) p. 368.
32. P. E. Walker, "An Ismá'ílí Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God" in *American Journal of Semitic Studies*, Vol. 2 (1974) p. 9.
33. *Ennead* V. 3.13; 5.6, etc.
34. Plotinus' work, directly or indirectly through such of his followers as the anti-Christian Porphyry (232-305) Iamblicus (c. 245-326) and Proclus (c. 412-485) influenced many Church Fathers as well as emergent Islamic philosophy. (See R. Baine Harris, "A Brief Description of Neoplatonism" in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. by R. Baine Harris. International Society for Neoplatonic Studies [Norfolk, VA: Old Dominion University, 1976] p. 1ff).
35. R. P. C. Hanson, "Biblical Exegesis in the Early Church" in Ackroyd, P. R., & C. F. Evans. *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to Jerome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970) p. 448.
36. Comm. on the Song XI:1000; cited in Louth, *Christian Mystical Tradition*, p. 83.
37. Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, trans. by A. Malherbe and E. Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978) pp. 94-95.
38. H. J. M. Turner, "The Mysterious Within Christianity" in *Eastern Churches Review*, Vol. 3 (Spring, 1971) p. 302.
39. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. by J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press) App.1; F. Graffin & A. M. Malingren, "La Tradition syriaque des homélies de Jean Chrysostom sur

l'incompréhensibilité de Dieu" in *Epektasis*, ed. by C. C. Kassinengieser (Paris, 1972) pp. 603–09.

40. Chrysostom, trans. Otto, *Idea of the Holy*, p. 184.

41. Enarr. 2 in Ps 26:8; MPL xxxvi, col. 203, cited in Turner, "The Mysterious Within Christianity," p. 301.

42. Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Eng. tr. of *Essai sur la Théologie*) (Cambridge and London: James Clarke & Co., 1957) p. 24.

43. These terms were earlier used by Proclus (412–c. 487 CE) in a quasi-theological context. Harry A. Wolfson opens his 1957 paper as follows, "By the time the Fathers of the Church began to offer negation as a solution to the problem of divine attributes, the theory of negative attributes had already been dealt with by Philo, Albinus and Plotinus." ("Negative Attributes in the Church Fathers and the Gnostic Basilides" in *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 50 [1957] p. 145)

44. See Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989) p. 87.

45. Louth, *ibid.*

46. DN VII.3: 872A–B.

47. Cited in P. Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 184.

48. PG. xciv, 797b, cited in T. Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Maryland: Penguin Books, 1964) p. 217.

49. Ia.7; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*. Vol. 1, trans. by Thomas Gilby (Cambridge: Blackfriars, 1964) p. 25.

50. *De Veritate*, cited in F. C. Happold, *Prayer and Meditation* (London: Pelican Books, 1971) p. 31.

51. III:33 trans. James Walsh, ed., *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981) p. 120

52. Cited Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976) p. 31. See further, J. Dillenberger, *God Hidden and Revealed* (Philadelphia: n.p., 1953); B. A. Gerrish, "To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God," *Journal of Religion*, vol. 53 (1973) pp. 263–92.

53. R. G. Williams, "The Via Negativa and the Foundations of Theology: An Introduction to the Thought of V. N. Lossky" in *New Studies in Theology I*, ed. by Stephen Sykes and Derek Holmes (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1980) p. 96; Lossky, *Mystical Theology*.

54. II § 27 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976 [1957]) pp. 179–254.

55. Barth, *ibid.*, p. 185.

56. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 15, p. 55.

57. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 6, p. 29.

58. Cited in Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "God" in *Islamic Spirituality: Foundations* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987) p. 314.

59. Cf. A. Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976) p. 270.

60. Arabic *huwiyya* is an abstract word that was originally "coined in order to express in Arabic the nuances of Greek philosophy." (A. M. Goichon, "Huwiyya" in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. Vol. 3 [Leiden, 1960] p. 644) It occurs in the so-called "Theology of Aristotle," Ibn Siná, and in numerous later mystical writers.

61. In his *Meccan Revelations (al-Futúhát al-Makkiyya)* and other works, Ibn 'Arabí frequently uses *huwiyya* alone or in construct form with other words, e.g., *huwiyya al-aḥadiyya* ("the He-ness of the Divine Oneness"); *huwiyya al-ḥaqq* ("the He-ness of the True One") (Shaykh Muḥyí al-Dín Ibn 'Arabí, *Al-Futúhát al-Makkiyya* ("The Meccan Revelations [Openings]") 4 Vols [Beirut: Dár Šadir, n.d.; 1968 = Cairo Ed. 1911]).

62. *Futúhát II*:130.

63. *Ištiláhát*, cited in 'Alí al-Jurjání, *Kitáb al-Ta'rifát* (A Book of Definitions) (Reprint, Librairie du Liban, 1985) 395; cf. W. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: SUNY, 1989) p. 394.

64. Cited in al-Jurjání, *Kitáb al-Ta'rifát*, p. 395.

65. 'Abd al-Karím ibn Ibráhím al-Jíllí, *al-Insán al-kámil fí ma'rifat al-awákkhir wa'l-awá'il*. 2 Vols. in 1 (Cairo: Mušafá al-Bábí al-Ḥalabí, 1375 AH/1956 CE) pp. 1:96, 97.

66. See R. Arnaldez, "Láhút and Násút," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. Vol. 5 (1960) pp. 611–14.

67. 2:3; see Hanna E. Kassis, *A Concordance to the Qur'an* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) pp. 479–80.

68. L. Gardet, "God in Islam" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Vol. 6 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987) p. 28.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

70. Nasr, "God," p. 312.

71. E. M. Al-Sharkawi, "The Aristotelian Categories and the Problem of Attributes in Islamic Theology" in *Graeco-Islamica*, Vol. 3 (1983) p. 30. The complications of the various categories of the divine attributes cannot be entered into here. See further, for example, Gardet, "God in Islam," pp. 33–34. For some Sunni Muslims, the strict doctrine of *tawḥíd* ("Unity of God") was maintained by holding that the "Attributes of the Essence" were co-eternal with and subsisted in God's Essence. In an inexplicable way, they were not God nor other than God (*bi-lá kayf wa bi-lá tashbīh*; "Without asking how or comparison").

72. Cited in Bahá'u'lláh, Mírzá Husayn 'Alí. *Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá*. Vol. III (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.) p. 15 = *Seven Valleys*, p. 15. Seven Divine Attributes are sometimes called the "Names of the Essence." Ibn 'Arabí reckoned them as [1] "The Living" (*al-Ḥayy*) [2] "the Knowing" (*al-'alím*) [3]

"the Wanting" (*al-múrid*) [4] "the Powerful" (*al-qadr*) [5] "the Speaking" (*al-mutakallim/ al-qá'il*) [6] "the Hearing" (*al-samf*) and [7] "the Seeing" (*al-baštr*). I follow here the translation of M. Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without Shore: Ibn Arabi, The Book, and the Law* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) p. 97, referring to various passages in Ibn 'Arabí's *Futúhát*.

73. Cited in Abú'l-Ḥamíd al-Gházálí, *Mishkat al-anwār* ed. by Abú 'Alá 'Affí (Cairo: Dár al-Qaymíya li'l-Ṭabá'a wa'l-Nashara, 1383/1964) p. 39.

74. *Encyclopedia Iranica* VI, ed. by E. Yarshater, Vol. 6 (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1993) p. 317. Worth noting in this respect is the following spontaneous supplication for the month of Ramaḍán transmitted by Abí 'Abd Alláh (Imám Ja'far al-Sádiq, d. c. 669–700) in which six pavilions are spoken about relative to specific divine attributes: "O my God! I verily, ask Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Glory (*surádiqu'l-majd*) and I beseech Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Splendour (*surádiqu'l-bahá*). I verily, ask Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Grandeur (*surádiqu'l-'azamat*) and I beseech Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Radiance (*surádiqu'l-jalál*). I verily, ask Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Might (*surádiqu'l-'izzat*) and I beseech Thee by Thy Name which is inscribed in the pavilion of Secrets (*surádiqu'l-sara'ir*) which is Foremost (*al-sábítq*) Paramount (*al-fá'iq*) Beauteous (*al-ḥusn*) Splendid (*al-naḍír*). And by the Lord of the Eight [Arch-] Angels (*al-malá'ikatu'l-thamániyat*) and the Lord of the Mighty Celestial Throne (*rabbu'l-'arshu'l-'azím*)." (Cited in Muhammad Báqir Biḥár Majlisí, *Biar al-anwár*², 105 Vols (Beirut: Dár Ihyá al-turáth al-'Arabí, 1956–72) p. 58:43, from *al-Iqbál* of Sayyid Raḍíy al-Dín ibn Táwús 1193–1266).

75. Káfi, I:92.

76. From the Arabic *Enneads* fragments, cited in Walker, "An Ismá'ílí Answer," p. 13.

77. P. Morewedge, *Neoplatonism and Islamic Thought* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992) p. viii.

78. Fazlur Rahman succinctly sums up the influence of Neoplatonic streams of thought about the One into early Islam: "On the basis of the Plotinian idea of the ultimate ground of Reality the One of Plotinus, as interpreted by his followers and endowed with a mind that contained the essences of all things, the philosophers reinterpreted and elaborated the Mu'tazilite doctrine of the Unity of God. According to the new doctrine, God was represented as Pure Being without essence or attributes, His only attribute being necessary existence. The attributes of the Deity were declared to be either negations or purely external relations, not affecting His Being and reducible to His necessary existence. God's knowledge was thus defined as 'non-absence of knowable things from Him'; His Will as 'impossibility of constraint upon His Being'; His creative activity as 'emanation of things from Him', etc." (*Islam* [London: University of Chicago Press, 1979] p. 118)

79. *Mishkat al-Anwār* ("The Niche for Lights") trans. by W. H. T. Gairdner (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1952) p. 107.

80. D. B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) p. 179.

81. Ibn 'Arabí, *Futúhát* II, p. 257; Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 60.

82. Ibn 'Arabí, *Futúhát* II, p. 502.

83. Cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 62

84. *Futúhát* I, p. 230.

85. *Futúhát* II, p. 557; cited in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 62.

86. Walker, "An Ismá'ílí Answer," p. 7.

87. P. E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abú Ya'qúb al-Sijistántí*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) p. 40f.

88. *Kitáb al-Iftikhár*, cited in Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, p. 78. The unknowability of the God beyond attributes is also discussed in the *Rasá'il Ikhwánu'l-safá'* ("Treatises of the Brethren of Purity," 10th cent. CE?) which show the influence of various schools of Hellenistic wisdom (I. R. Netton, *Muslim Neoplatonists: An Introduction to the Thought of the Brethren of Purity* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982) p. 39f).

89. Shaykh Ahmad Al-Asá'í, *Tafstr Súratu'l-Tawḥíd* (Kirmán: al-Sa'ada, 1379/1958–59) p. 15.

90. The new *basmalah* of the Báb is used, for example, throughout the Arabic *Bayán* (1847/8). It also prefixes a fairly large number of tablets of Bahá'u'lláh.

91. The *Du'a al-ṣabáḥ* ("Dawn Prayer") can be found, for example, in 'Abbas al-Qummí, *Mafatḥ al-jinán* (Beirut: Dár al-aḍwá', 1409/1989) pp. 91–94. Clarification of a phrase within it was requested of the Báb by a certain Mirzá Muhammad 'Alí, the Guilder—the *Tafstr Du'a al-ṣabáḥ* can be found, among other manuscript locations, in Iran National Bahá'í Archives Manuscript Collection (INBMC) 100+5 vols (Privately published, 132–134/1976–1978) 40, p. 155–62.

92. al-Qummí, *Mafatḥ al-jinán*, p. 9.

93. INBMC, 40, pp. 155–59.

94. The hadíth of 'amá' is found in a variety of forms in a number of Sunnī and Shí'í sources. The word 'amá' (loosely "Cloud") has been variously translated and interpreted. For some details, see Stephen Lambden, "An Early Poem of Mirzá Husayn 'Alí Bahá' Alláh: The Sprinkling of the Cloud of Unknowing (*Rashḥ-i 'Amá'*)" in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Sept. 1984) pp. 4–114. For Sufis like 'Abd al-Karim al-Jílí (d. c. 1420) 'amá' indicated the absolute hiddenness of the transcendent godhead. It signified "Being sunk in itself, bare potentiality," "the eternal and unchangeable ground of Being," the "absolute inwardness (*butún*) and occultation (*istitar*)" of the transcendent divine Essence (*al-insán* 1:50f; R. A. Nicholson, *Studies in Islamic Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967) pp. 94–96).

95. This letter of the Báb is contained in *Tafstr hadth al-'amá'* (6007C:1ff. 6007 C:1-16). It was apparently written in reply to questions posed by Siyyid Yahyá Dárábí, Vahíd (a leading disciple of the Báb; see Fádíl-i-Mázandarání, *Asrár al-athár*, vol. 4 (N.c.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972) p. 391 (text also partially quoted here).

96. One another level, *'amá'* and *hawá'* ("air") indicate the created *nafs* ("Self") of God, as opposed to the mystery of God's transcendent and uncreated reality. God's being in *'amá'* is expressive of the station (*maqám*) of the manifestation (*zuhúr*) of the "First Dhikr" (*dhikr al-awwál*; the primal divine manifestation and locus of prophethood).

97. Various modes of the divine theophany (*tajallí*) are mentioned in Sufi treatises; i.e., (1) *tajallí al-dhát* ("the theophany of the Divine Essence"); (2) *tajallí al-ṣifát* ("the theophany of the Divine Attributes") and (3) *tajallí al-af'ál* ("the theophany of the Divine Actions").

98. Q. 50:16b; see INBMC, vol. 40, pp. 180-92.

99. See INBMC, vol. 40, pp. 181-83ff.

100. See INBMC, vol. 69, p. 14f.

101. The *Khuṭba al-tuṭunjiyya* ("Sermon of the Gulf") is found in various sources including Rajab al-Bursí, *Masháriq al-Anwár* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1978) pp. 166-70; and 'Alí Yazdí Hā'irí, *Ilzám al-Náib*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Mu'assat al-A'lámí lil-Mabú'át, 1404\1984) pp. 242-52. For an introduction and full translation, see Lambden and Fananapazir, 1996 (forthcoming). As both the spelling and vowelings of the consonants of *tuṭunjiyya* vary, this is but one of a number of possible readings.

102. Both Sayyid Kázim and the Báb accept this reading (see Sayyid Kázim, *Sharh Khuṭba al-tuṭunjiyya* [Tabriz, 1270/1853/4] p. 185ff). The recent edition in Bursí's *Masháriq* reads: "I saw the Mercy of God (*rahmat Alláh*)" (p. 166), while that printed in Hā'irí's *Ilzám al-Nāṣib* places a letter "*wáw*" before the word God (*Alláh*) (p. 243).

103. INBMC, vol. 40, p. 179.

104. INBMC, vol. 40, p. 161.

105. *Bayán-i-Fársí*, vol. 4, pp. 1, 105; provisional trans. cf. *al-Bayán al-'Arabí*, vol. 4, p. 1.

106. *Bayán-i-Fársí*, vol. 4, p. 2, 110; cf. *al-Bayán al-'Arabí*, vol. 4, p. 2.

107. See S. Lambden and K. Fananapazir, "The Sermon of the Gulf (*Khuṭba al-tuṭunjiyya* / *Taṭanjiyya*) of Imám 'Alí: An Introduction and Translation with Occasional Notes" in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin*, vol. 9, no. 1 (forthcoming).

108. *Dalá'il-i Sab'ih* (Seven Proofs) of the Báb, 31f; cf. 57f.

109. See *Má'idiy-i Ásmánt*, comp. by Ishráq Khávarí, 9 vols. (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 128-9/1972-73) vol. 7, p. 64

110. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. and comp. by Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1949) p. 166; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) p. 103.

111. Anthropopathism is ascribing to the Deity human emotions, passions, or affections.

112. *Gleanings*, p. 165.

113. Bahá'u'lláh, *Áthár-i Qalam-i A'lá*, vol. 3 (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.) pp. 114-15; *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, trans. by 'Alí Kuli Khan assisted by Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) pp. 22-23.

114. *The Hidden Words*, trans. by Shoghi Effendi (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1975) p. 20.

115. This tablet is listed by Shoghi Effendi in his list of "Bahá'u'lláh's Best-Known Writings." As far as I am aware, it has not been published. I have relied on a typed Arabic copy supplied to me in 1986 by the Bahá'í World Center (Haifa, Israel).

116. In Islamic theosophy and mysticism as well as in Bábí and Bahá'í texts, the Arabic letter "H" (*há'*) and the masculine pronoun *Huwa/Hú* are given kabbalistic, cosmological, and esoteric significances. In his *Iṣṭiláhát*. ("Sufi Lexicon") Ibn 'Arabí interprets *Hú* ("He") to signify "the Unseen [God] (*al-ghayb*) Whom it is not fitting to observe" (cited in Ali Al Jurjání, *Kitáb al-Ta'rífát (A Book of Definitions)* [Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 1985] p. 395).

117. The Báb accorded various titles to his followers ranging, for example, from being part of the pleroma of (subordinate) divinity (*ulúhiyy/rubúbiyya*) to being a "mirror" (*maráya*) or "mirror of God" (*mir'at Alláh*). Mírzá Yahyá is known to have been among those accorded this latter title by the Báb.

118. See *Má'idiy-i-Ásmánt*, vol. 9, pp. 22-23.

119. See *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1930) vol. 3, p. 485 (= SW IV/18:304 = Horace Holley, ed., *Bahá'í Scriptures* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928) No. 847, pp. 459-60; cf. SW III/14:8f).

120. *Majmu'ih-i Alwah-i Mubáraka* (Reprint, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) p. 307ff; trans. *Gleanings*, pp. 60, 62-63.

121. *Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá*, vol. 3, p. 40. Also worth noting in this context is the fact that in the *Jawáhiru'l-Asrár* seven mystic stages are outlined, the last of them being a transcendent city without name or designation and unutterable (86ff). Therein the "Sun of the Unseen" (*shamsu'l-ghayb*) blazes forth from the "Horizon of the Unseen" (*ufqu'l-ghayb*). In its universe are spheres with moons generated from light which dawn forth and set in the "Ocean of the Unseen" (*bahru'l-ghayb*). None but God and the "Manifestations of His Self" (*mazáhir nafsíhi*) are aware of this realm and its recondite mysteries (*Áthár-i-Qalam-i-A'lá*, vol. 3, p. 86ff).

122. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 74; trans., p. 64.

123. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 73; trans., pp. 63-64.

124. *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, p. 107f/ trans., p. 89ff.

125. *Mufawadát.* p. 166; trans., *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220.
126. *Ibid.*, p. 176; trans. *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 220–21
127. N. M. Hosseini, *Dr. Henry Auguste Forel* (Dundas, Ontario: Persian Institute for Bahá'í Studies, 1989) pp. 101–2.
128. *Ibid.*; trans. *Some Answered Questions*, p. 220–21.
129. *Mufawadát*, p. 113; *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 148–49.
130. See *Má'idiy-i-Ásmání*, vol. 2, p. 102.
131. See *Gleanings*, p. 3ff.
132. Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1947) pp. 22–23.
133. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
134. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, comp. by Helen Hornby, 2d ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 1724, p. 511.
135. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. 1, p. 204.
136. See *Some Answered Questions*, p. 116f; trans., p. 154f.
137. "What is meant by personal God is a God Who is conscious of His creation, Who has a Mind, a Will, a Purpose, and not, as many scientists and materialists believe; an unconscious and determined force operating in the universe. Such conception of the Divine Being, as the Supreme and ever present Reality in the world, is not anthropomorphic, for it transcends all human limitations and forms, and does by no means attempt to define the essence of Divinity which is obviously beyond any human comprehension. To say that God is a personal Reality does not mean that He has a physical form, or does in any way resemble a human being. To entertain such belief would be sheer blasphemy" (from a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, April 21, 1939, cited in *Lights of Guidance*, p. 477 No 1574).
138. See *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) p. 147f.
139. *The Seven Valleys*, p. 9.
140. Cited in *Áthár-i Qalam-i A'lá*, vol. 3, p. 127; trans. *Seven Valleys*, p. 34.
141. Cited in *Seven Valleys*, p. 39.
142. *Knowing the Unknowable God*, p. 109.
143. M. Sells, "Apophysis in Plotinus" in *Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 78 (1985) p. 47. Michael Sells' recently published *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) is an important contribution to the mysticism of *apophysis*, "speaking away." It came to my attention too late to make use of in the writing of this paper.