

# What Are Baha'i Taught About God?

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The Baha'i faith teaches an absolute monotheism, stressing the unity of God. In particular ways, however, God's nature is unspecified and, as a result, described in very general terms and is an unknowable essence. For the Baha'i, "God is greater than all words," and, conveniently, doctrinal approaches to God are sternly rejected.<sup>1</sup> This is one reason Baha'is disdain systematic theology.

There are, of course, "benefits" to a hidden deity. If the one true God is unknowable and undefined (except in general terms necessary to any rational concept of Deity—eternal, infinite, righteous, omnipotent and so on), then other religions' concepts of the Deity have little to contrast it with. While other religions may know their God as "B," they cannot immediately deny the Baha'i God as "non-B" if the Baha'i God is spoken of only in general terms acceptable to most faiths.

Baha'u'llah describes God as "the innermost Spirit of Spirits and eternal Essence of Essences"; "the Most Exalted, the Inaccessible"; "the invisible and unknowable Essence"; "the All-Pervading, the Incorruptible" and a plethora of other descriptive terms that still leave one wondering what God is really like.<sup>2</sup> However, reflecting Islam, Baha'u'llah did describe God as "Supreme Singleness," an apparent reference denying the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>3</sup>

In Baha'i, God does not incarnate Himself. Also, God is incapable of being known personally; at best, only the Manifestations reveal something of God's nature. God then, is an unknowable essence who is believed to manifest (to a degree) through the prophets. Even the Manifestations, of course, can be "known" only through historical records (not personally).

As we consider the Baha'i theology we discover the Baha'i relationship to God is quite unlike the kind of relationship the Christian has with God and Christ, where there is on-going direct personal knowledge and intimacy (John 17:3). Christians talk to God through Christ daily in the manner of normal conversation, and through the presence of His Holy Spirit and by His Word, He replies. Christians do not talk to the prophets—for example, Moses and Abraham. Thus, without such personal communication, it seems doubtful that the Baha'i would talk to or pray to their God (or His prophets) in the same way (if at all) that a

Christian would to Jesus. They could praise their God, as Baha'u'llah did, and seem to talk to him, but the conversation would be one-sided, apart from mystical experiences that might be interpreted as a "reply." Communication with or response from an impersonal and unknowable Deity would, it seems, be rather like interaction with a new type of unknown energy, such as some magnetic force. How would one evaluate a response or even know it was one? "Personality is in the Manifestation of the Divinity, not in the essence of the Divinity."<sup>4</sup>

Thus, if God cannot be known personally in the Christian sense, it is hard to conceive of having a personal relationship to Him, or even with the Manifestations, which allegedly reveal Him, for they are, after all, dead and gone. All that is left are historical records, a "relationship" with the God described therein (the difference between, say, reading about Jesus and knowing Him), and perhaps, again, mystical experiences.

Clearly, historic knowledge of the Baha'i prophets is not the same as being known by God (Gal. 4:9); as being loved by him (John 14:21, 23; 16:27); as being adopted into his family (Gal. 4:5-9; Eph. 1:5); and as being united to Him intimately (1 Cor. 12:27). After all, does the Baha'i God work within the Baha'i convert personally and come to dwell within him and sanctify him in the way the triune God of the Scriptures does (1 Cor. 6:19; Phil. 2:13)?

Thus, an immense gulf exists between the relationship of the believer to his God in Baha'i and to that relationship found in Christianity. The Christian God is vastly more related to His people than the Baha'i God is: the image of God in man, the incarnation, the atonement and all aspects of Christian salvation (such as union with Christ) are intensely personal and underlie the deep bond that exists between the Christian God and the redeemed believer.

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This human need for personal relationship and divine communion was one reason why the "far-off" God of Islam gave birth to the mystical Sufi movement. The wholly transcendent Allah could not provide the immanence of truly personal interaction, whereas mystical experience could. No doubt it explains Baha'i mysticism as well. Thus, this is the manner in which a Baha'i could have a "personal" relationship to God—through mystical experience. But isn't it true that such experience can give only the illusion of that relationship, since it is one which is primarily psychological or occult? Further, from the Christian perspective no God ever responds because no such God exists to respond.

Nevertheless, mysticism is not the manner in which Jesus Christ bridges the gap between people and God. In His person at the Cross, Jesus paid the penalty of divine justice against sin (Rom. 3:23-26; 2 Cor. 5:17-21). He reconciled people

to Himself so that through faith people can be on intimate terms with God. Then, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and through the Bible, the Word of God, people can study and learn of God and His will and grow in personal relationship to Him (2 Pet. 3:18). Regardless of what one thinks about mysticism, a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ would seem far preferable to faith in an unknowable, hidden deity.

Not surprisingly, the Baha'i God is, in many respects, similar to the Allah of the Qur'an—majestic, utterly separate from people, unreachable, “the Compassionate, the All Merciful” and so on. (In his *The Kitab-I-Iqan* Baha'u'llah quotes the Qur'an about 145 times, the Bible only ten.) Baha'u'llah described God as follows:

God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress.... He is and hath ever been veiled in ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.... No tie of direct intercourse can possibly bind Him to His creatures. He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness.<sup>5</sup>

Such a statement, for one, reveals the Baha'i (and Islamic) antipathy towards the Christian concept of the incarnation (Phil. 2:1-10). In such theology, the very idea that God would “degrade” Himself so as to become one of His creatures (let alone die in their stead) is unthinkable; indeed it is demeaning and blasphemous to the grandeur and transcendent majesty of God.

Again, as one reads Baha'i descriptions, it becomes clear that people can never really know this God personally. So one wonders how one really trusts a God one does not know, and never can know? References to His “closeness” are rare and, although present,<sup>6</sup> seem to be irrelevant in a personal sense. The “attaining unto the Presence” of God is only possible in “the Day of Resurrection” and refers to attaining God's “Beauty” through the prophet.<sup>7</sup> God Himself is still not known directly or personally: “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.”<sup>8</sup> “No one hath any access to the Invisible Essence. The way is barred and the road impassable.”<sup>9</sup> The contrast to Christianity is marked. Jesus taught, “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent” (John 17:3).

An article in *World Order*, “The God of Baha'u'llah,” also discusses the unknowableness of God. The author discusses with accuracy and some satisfaction the contrast between the Christian and Baha'i viewpoints: “The God of the Baha'is seems more distant, more unapproachable than the Father evoked in the Gospels. It is no longer a question of man ‘made in the image of God.’ The Godhead is an alien and inconceivable Being nearer to the God of Spinoza than to the God of Genesis.”<sup>10</sup> The Baha'i author goes on to point out that in spite of

our inability to know this alien God, we can nevertheless, “open ourselves” to Him. Thus, “God remains in His heights, but His Spirit, the Holy Spirit (which is in no way here the “third person” of an impossible “trinity” but, more logically, the spirit of God and of the love given by God), throws a bridge across the chasm and annuls the separation.”<sup>11</sup>

Presumably God is able to remain alien while we simultaneously come to experience Him in some sense through the prophets or “the Holy Spirit.” This may be accomplished “mystically.” But this is not an intimate knowledge involving personal fellowship, communion and union with God as in Christianity. In essence, the divine love of the Baha’i God is one of limited self-disclosure and perhaps of mystical experience but worlds apart from the love of God seen at the Cross (John 3:16), which is personal redemption.

At best Baha’i knowledge of God is intellectual at one level and mystical at another. Thus, as ‘Abdu’l-Baha stated, knowing about the Manifestations is knowing about God. “If man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God.”<sup>12</sup> Baha’is also stress the importance of mystical knowledge of God. In his essay “The Knowledge of God: An Essay on Baha’i Epistemology,” Jack McLean refers to the mystical approach to “knowing”. He refers to “Baha’u’llah’s notion of purifying the consciousness from all previous presuppositions of knowledge in order to gain true knowledge,” and he states that “Baha’u’llah is clearly saying that one must empty himself of worldly knowledge in order to discover the knowledge of God”<sup>13</sup> (cf. Rom. 1:18-21). Baha’u’llah declared that the seeker after knowledge of God, “Must before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy. He must purge his breast... from all shadowy and ephemeral attachments.”<sup>14</sup>

Divine mystical knowledge of God is to be sought in place of worldly, normal knowledge: “The most grievous of all veils is the veil of knowledge. Upon its ashes, we have reared the tabernacle of divine knowledge.”<sup>15</sup> Hence it is not surprising that “the Bab, therefore, forbade the reading of all non-Babi books, and commanded that they be burned.... Believers must read only the *Bayan*, and books written by eminent Babi scholars under the shadow of the *Bayan*. No one is permitted to own more than nineteen books, the first of which is to be the *Bayan*.”<sup>16</sup> This sentiment, obviously, was quite contrary to the “free inquiry” and “scientific approach” of modern Baha’i leaders.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *World Order*, Fall 1978, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Baha’u’llah, *The Kitab-I-Iqan: The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 177, 179, 190; ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Baha’i World Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 30; Shoghi Effendi, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah* (Wilmette, IL: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> William McLeewe Miller, *The Baha’i Faith: Its History and Teachings* (South Pasadena, CAL

- William Carey Library, 1974), p. 226, citing Baha'u'llah, ed. H. Holley, *The Baha'i Scriptures* (New York: Brentane's, 1923), p. 481.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Kitab-I-Iqan*, p. 98.
- <sup>6</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 186.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Kitab-I-Iqan*, pp. 140-145; 169-170.
- <sup>8</sup> *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 65.
- <sup>9</sup> Miller, *The Baha'i Faith*, p. 226, citing *Baha'i Scriptures* (1923), 459.
- <sup>10</sup> *World Order*, Fall 1978, p. 12.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>12</sup> *Baha'i World Faith*, p. 323.
- <sup>13</sup> *World Order*, Spring 1978, pp. 48-49.
- <sup>14</sup> *The Kitab-I-Iqan*, pp. 192-193.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- <sup>16</sup> Miller, *The Baha'i Faith*, p. 64. Followers of Bab were Babis. Baha'u'llah rescinded this command.

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