

# The Attributes and Qualities of God

The mind-boggling search to understand the ability to know God and at the same time feel completely at a loss as to how to even begin to know the Creator!

Drawing from the Writings themselves the following was to piece together the puzzle of one of those age-old mysteries of spiritual existence, the brilliant flow of the attributes and qualities of God. One Creator, Manifestations appearing in the utmost unity and oneness, and humanity spread in an array of beauty. All connected, and yet separate from the other grade, all in complete harmony and still operating within their own sphere of action, and all showing forth the same light, though one is the Source of attributes and qualities, the others are the Perfect Reflections, and then humans appearing as those that emulate. The journey is now to follow the dots and realize that in the end we must humble ourselves to the knowledge that the dots disappear as we approach our Beloved and our living God, the Most-Exalted, the Incomparable.

## Overview

### The Source:

...for each name, each attribute, each perfection which we affirm of God, there exists a sign in man; if it were otherwise, man could not imagine these perfections, and could not understand them...Consequently the Divinity of God, which is the sum of all perfections, reflects itself in the reality of man; that is to say, the Essence of Oneness is the gathering of all perfections, and from this unity He casts a reflection upon the human reality.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’i World Faith*, p. 310.)

### The Perfect Mirror:

The sun does not leave his place in the heavens and descend into the mirror, for the actions of ascent and descent, coming and going, do not belong to the Infinite, they are the methods of finite beings. In the Manifestation of God, the perfectly polished mirror, appear the qualities of the Divine in a form that man is capable of comprehending.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 26.)

### Humanity:

Divine education is that of the Kingdom of God: it consists in acquiring divine perfections, and this is true education; for in this state man becomes the focus of divine blessings, the manifestation of the words, “Let Us make man in Our image, and after Our likeness.” (Gen. 1:26)

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 8.)

## The Puzzle

**The Long Obligatory Prayer is a good example of what has made my head run in circles for years- Statements like this always leave me confused wondering how can I say that God is sanctified above all attributes and then call Him the All-Glorious:**

I testify that Thou hast been sanctified above all attributes and holy above all names. No God is there but Thee, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious.

(Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 320.)

**The Attributes and Qualities of God as we understand them- To realize that even they are inadequate to describe the Manifestations of God:**

If I describe Thee, O my God, as Him Who is the All-Perceiving, I find myself compelled to admit that They Who are the highest Embodiments of perception have been created by virtue of Thy behest. And if I extol Thee as Him Who is the All-Wise, I, likewise, am forced to recognize that the Well Springs of wisdom have themselves been generated through the operation of Thy Will. And if I proclaim Thee as the Incomparable One, I soon discover that they Who are the inmost essence of oneness have been sent down by Thee and are but the evidences of Thine handiwork. And if I acclaim Thee as the Knower of all things, I must confess that they Who are the Quintessence of knowledge are but the creation and instruments of Thy Purpose.

Exalted, immeasurably exalted, art Thou above the strivings of mortal man to unravel Thy mystery, to describe Thy glory, or even to hint at the nature of Thine Essence. For whatever such strivings may accomplish, they never can hope to transcend the limitations imposed upon Thy creatures, inasmuch as these efforts are actuated by Thy decree, and are begotten of Thine invention. The loftiest sentiments which the holiest of saints can express in praise of Thee, and the deepest wisdom which the most learned of men can utter in their attempts to comprehend Thy nature, all revolve around that Center Which is wholly subjected to Thy sovereignty, Which adareth Thy Beauty, and is propelled through the movement of Thy Pen.

Nay, forbid it, O my God, that I should have uttered such words as must of necessity imply the existence of any direct relationship between the Pen of Thy Revelation and the essence of all created things. Far, far are They Who are related to Thee above the conception of such relationship! All comparisons and likenesses fail to do justice to the Tree of Thy Revelation, and every way is barred to the comprehension of the Manifestation of Thy Self and the Day Spring of Thy Beauty.

Far, far from Thy glory be what mortal man can affirm of Thee, or attribute unto Thee, or the praise with which he can glorify Thee! Whatever duty Thou hast prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, I.)

**The Attributes of God are not just different colors of light, separate, and apart from one another. These attributes are part of one whole, inseparable from God- though glimmerings of individual qualities they may appear to our little minds:**

1. It is evident that these qualities were ever with God, even at this time they are with him, they are inseparable from him because divinity is not subject to division. Division is a sign of imperfection and God is the perfect one... It is clear that the attributes of divinity are co-equal and co-existent with the essence. In that station there is absolute unity.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 148.)

2. A God that is only loving or only just is not a perfect God. The divinity has to possess both of these aspects...

(Shoghi Effendi, *Arohanui - Letters to New Zealand*, p. 32.)

3. At whatever time I reassure myself and gladden my soul with the wonders of Thy mercy, the tokens of Thy gracious providence, and the evidences of Thy generosity, I tremble before the manifestations of Thy justice and the signs of Thy wrath. I recognize that Thou art known by these two names and described by these two attributes, yet Thou carest not whether Thou art invoked by Thy name the Ever- Forgiving, or Thy name the Wrathful.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Compilations- The Importance of Obligatory Prayer and Fasting*, VI.)

## Finding the Pieces

**Human limitations. This explanation given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá opens up the doors to understanding the mystery-**

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden.

As our knowledge of things, even of created and limited things, is knowledge of their qualities and not of their essence, how is it possible to comprehend in its essence the Divine Reality, which is unlimited? For the inner essence of anything is not comprehended, but only its qualities. For example, the inner essence of the sun is unknown, but is understood by its qualities, which are heat and light. The inner essence of man is unknown and not evident, but by its qualities it is characterized and known. Thus everything is known by its qualities and not by its essence. Although the mind encompasses all things, and the outward beings are comprehended by it, nevertheless these beings with regard to their essence are unknown; they are only known with regard to their qualities.

Then how can the eternal everlasting Lord, Who is held sanctified from comprehension and conception, be known by His essence? That is to say, as things can only be known by their qualities and not by their essence, it is certain that the Divine Reality is unknown with regard to its essence and is known with regard to its attributes. Besides, how can the phenomenal reality embrace the Preexistent Reality? For comprehension is the result of encompassing -- embracing must be, so that comprehension may be -- and the Essence of Unity surrounds all and is not surrounded.

Also the difference of conditions in the world of beings is an obstacle to comprehension. For example, this mineral belongs to the mineral kingdom; however far it may rise, it can never comprehend the power of growth. The plants, the trees, whatever progress they may make, cannot conceive of the power of sight or the powers of the other senses; and the animal cannot imagine the condition of man -- that is to say, his spiritual powers. Difference of condition is an obstacle to knowledge; the inferior degree cannot comprehend the superior degree. How then can the phenomenal reality comprehend the Preexistent Reality? Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and the knowledge of His attributes, and not of His Reality. This knowledge of the attributes is also proportioned to the capacity and power of man; it is not absolute. Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things as they exist, according to the capacity and the power of man. **For the phenomenal reality can comprehend the Preexistent attributes only to the extent of the human capacity.** The mystery of Divinity is sanctified and purified from the comprehension of the beings, for all that comes to the imagination is that which man understands, and the power of the understanding of man does not embrace the Reality of the Divine Essence. All that man is able to understand are the attributes of Divinity, the radiance of which appears and is visible in the world and within men's souls.

When we look at the world and within men's souls, we see wonderful signs of the divine perfections, which are clear and apparent; for the reality of things proves the Universal Reality. The Reality of Divinity may be compared to the sun, which from the height of its magnificence shines upon all the horizons; and each horizon, and each soul, receives a share of its radiance. If this light and these rays did not exist, beings would not exist; all beings express something and partake of

some ray and portion of this light. The splendors of the perfections, bounties and attributes of God shine forth and radiate from the reality of the Perfect Man -- that is to say, the Unique One, the supreme Manifestation of God. Other beings receive only one ray, but the supreme Manifestation is the mirror for this Sun, which appears and becomes manifest in it, with all its perfections, attributes, signs and wonders.

The knowledge of the Reality of the Divinity is impossible and unattainable, but the knowledge of the Manifestations of God is the knowledge of God, for the bounties, splendors and divine attributes are apparent in Them. Therefore, if man attains to the knowledge of the Manifestations of God, he will attain to the knowledge of God; and if he be neglectful of the knowledge of the Holy Manifestations, he will be bereft of the knowledge of God. It is then ascertained and proved that the Holy Manifestations are the center of the bounty, signs and perfections of God. Blessed are those who receive the light of the divine bounties from the enlightened Dawning-points!

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221.)

#### **And again in a similar connection:**

1. ...we speak of the names and attributes of the Divine Reality, and we praise Him by attributing to Him sight, hearing, power, life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections. When we look at the existing world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection; therefore, we say that the sanctified Essence of God is wisdom. Weakness is imperfection, and power is perfection; consequently, we say that the sanctified Essence of God is the acme of power. It is not that we can comprehend His knowledge, His sight, His power and life, for it is beyond our comprehension; for the essential names and attributes of God are identical with His Essence, and His Essence is above all comprehension.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.)

2. To man, the Essence of God is incomprehensible, so also are the worlds beyond this, and their condition. It is given to man to obtain knowledge, to attain to great spiritual perfection, to discover hidden truths and to manifest even the attributes of God; but still man cannot comprehend the Essence of God. Where the ever-widening circle of man’s knowledge meets the spiritual world a Manifestation of God is sent to mirror forth His splendour.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 66.)

# Understanding the Puzzle

In brief the essential qualities and attributes of God are one and the same with His essence. It is impossible for us to understand them or reach to their station. Their reflection however appears in the Mirror, the Manifestation of God, in a complete and perfect manner, though in a way and form that our finite minds and souls can understand them. We in turn struggle each and every day to emulate these qualities and in that way know God. If God is the Sun then His light dawns and appears in the Mirror, though it never leaves its own state or condition, and we the little pocket mirrors work steadily each day to clean our hearts so that we can emulate the light of God in the highest degree of perfection possible.