

The Beginning that Hath No Beginning: Bahá'í Cosmogony¹

by Vahid Brown

Behold, O concourse of the earth, the splendours of the End, revealed in the Manifestations of
the Beginning!
—Bahá'u'lláh

Endowed with consciousness, gifted with reason, humankind's experience of the world is necessarily an experience of meaning, collectively embodied in our worldviews and revealed in our cultures, languages, institutions, and ways of life. Myth, in the sense of the core sacred narrative of humankind's spiritual traditions, has for millennia been a circle enclosing all aspects of human life. At the center of this circle is the consciousness of the intimate relationship between the Absolute and the world. The fount of the mythic consciousness is a narrative of cosmogony, a foundational, overarching story of the creation of the universe. The perception of this link between the deep core of the Bahá'í Faith's spiritual vision of the universe and its outermost application in its social, administrative or institutional affairs is essential to an adequate awareness of modern Bahá'í life as *sacred*. The goal of this paper is to delineate several fundamental aspects of Bahá'í cosmogony and its underlying metaphysics, aspects which are central to the mythic vision of the world that animates Bahá'í life.

Throughout the works of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, creation remains an important theme, addressed in a variety of ways in several different "codes,"³ often alluding to aspects of the Islamic cosmogonic tradition. More than any other term, symbol, or concept, however, the Will of God is at the center of the Bahá'í notion of creation. It is the defining term of Bahá'í myth at every level, be it prophetological, epistemological, historical, societal, or personal.

In Bahá'u'lláh's *Lawh-i-Hikmat* (Tablet of Wisdom) we find an important discussion of the Will and of cosmogony that provides an ideal framework for our exploration, as it brings together diverse but parallel creation narratives found in the broader corpus of Bahá'í scripture. This paper will be structured around a detailed exploration of four selected passages from the Tablet (paragraphs 8, 9, and 12).

The Tablet was addressed to Áqá Muhammad Qá'iní, Nabíl-i-Akbar, arguably the most learned of Bahá'u'lláh's early disciples.⁴ Nabíl-i-Akbar was deeply versed in virtually all fields of study available to a man of his time and place, a fact to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá referred when speaking of him as a man "of wide learning, at once a mujtahid, a philosopher, a mystic, and gifted with intuitive insight, he was also an accomplished man of letters and an orator without a peer."⁵ Such a prodigious wealth of knowledge on the part of His audience may explain Bahá'u'lláh's allusions in this Tablet to so many currents of cosmogonic understanding in Islam.

As regards thine assertions about the beginnings of creation, this is a matter on which conceptions vary by reason of the divergences in men's thoughts and opinions. Wert thou to assert that it hath ever existed and shall continue to exist, it would be true; or wert thou to affirm the same concept as is mentioned in the sacred Scriptures, no doubt would there be about it, for it hath been revealed by God, the Lord of the worlds.⁶

This passage has been interpreted in a number of ways by various scholars of the Bahá'í Faith, the gamut of which can be gauged by referring to the works of Adib Taherzadeh, Moojan Momen, and Juan Cole.

Adib Taherzadeh maintained that these sentences, along with the remainder of this paragraph, give an unequivocal statement of the eternity of the world, and a firm rejection of the idea of a temporally originated cosmos, of creation *ex nihilo*.⁷ He reads the paragraph as juxtaposing two ideas of creation: (a) that "it hath ever existed," that it is eternal and (b) that "God was a hidden treasure and created man in order to make Himself known," which refers to the sentence in the Tablet immediately following those given above.⁸ The lat-

ter idea, to Taherzadeh, “seems to imply an interval without a creation,” i.e., the notion of temporal origination.⁹ Taherzadeh is clear, however, that such an idea is implied and is *only* implied, and he goes on to opine that what is really being distinguished are two ideas of eternity, “the eternity of God and the eternity of His creation.”¹⁰ He explains this idea by referencing talks on the matter by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions*, and another Tablet of Bahá’u’lláh from the ‘Akká period, the Lawh-i- ‘Abdu’l-Vahháb.¹¹

A different reading of this paragraph is presented by Moojan Momen in an article in which he argues for cognitive relativism vis-à-vis questions of Bahá’í metaphysics.¹² In it, he describes the issue as “that of whether the world of creation is coeternal with God or created in time.”¹³ In line with the development and application to Bahá’í metaphysics of the idea of cognitive relativism, which is the wider context in which this statement occurs, the author suggests that both of these positions are equally valid, but neither of them are “true” in anything like an absolute sense, for they concern realities or processes about which no intelligible concept can be considered adequate. Momen appears to read the passage as *explicitly* suggesting a notion of creation in time, which is then set in juxtaposition to the notion of eternity.

Juan Cole’s position lies somewhere in between. In his draft entry on the Tablet of Wisdom for the Bahá’í encyclopedia project, Cole seems, like Momen, to take for granted that Bahá’u’lláh is writing about the question of the eternity of the world versus its creation in time, out of nothing.¹⁴ To Cole, Bahá’u’lláh is saying that “both the eternity of the world and the creation of the world are valid ways of talking,” a statement which he supports by a treatment of the same distinction between essential (or ontological) pre-existence and temporal pre-existence noted by Taherzadeh.¹⁵ That is, the world is originated by God and is therefore contingent, and God, as That upon which the existence of the world is contingent, is essentially pre-existent. Yet this process of originating the cosmos has always been going on, and there is not a *time* in which it began, before which there was no world. Thus, to speak of God being *before* the creation is to speak of His existential rather than temporal priority in relation to the world. These concepts are explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the text Taherzadeh cites.¹⁶

Both Momen and Cole are reading this passage as a clear reference to the notions of creation in time, creation from nothing, or both. If we follow Cole and accept “sacred Scriptures” to embrace the Bible and the Qu’rán,¹⁷ we are left with the quandary that neither of these texts carry an explicit concept of creation *ex nihilo*. In fact, there are plenty of indications that the idea of temporal creation *ex nihilo* didn’t arise in the Abrahamic religions until a considerable time after the composition of their core scriptures.¹⁸ Additionally, there have always been important figures and sects in these religious traditions promoting readings of these texts that did not imply an *ex nihilo* creation, but simply a causal relationship between God and the world. One such group was the Shaykhí movement, with which Nabíl-i-Akbar, the immediate recipient of this Tablet, was associated.¹⁹

Momen’s reading of the passage hints at a larger problem. Do the Bahá’í writings affirm the eternity of the world or its creation out of nothing in time? If the answer is yes to both, how do we resolve the apparent contradiction?

As Momen implied in his comments about the Lawh-i-Hikmat, the answer is yes on both counts. As to the eternity of the world, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote and spoke emphatically on this point. One could cite, in support of the argument for eternity, the following:

Know that it is one of the most abstruse spiritual truths that the world of existence—that is to say, this endless universe—has no beginning. . . . If we could imagine a time when no beings existed, this imagination would be the denial of the Divinity of God. Moreover, absolute nonexistence cannot become existence. . . . Therefore, as the Essence of Unity (that is, the existence of God) is everlasting and eternal—that is to say, it has neither beginning nor end—it is certain that this world of existence, this endless universe, has neither beginning nor end.²⁰

The Creator always had a creation; the rays have always shone and gleamed from the reality of the sun, for without the rays the sun would be opaque darkness. The names and attributes of God require the existence of beings, and the Eternal Bounty does not cease. If it were to, it would be contrary to the perfections of God.²¹

Here we see no equivocation, no room for the suggestion of temporal creation or creation *ex nihilo*. Such,

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according to these citations, would be contrary to God's perfection and in denial of His divinity. The matter would appear to be settled, if it weren't for other instances in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that speak of creation from nothing. For example:

All that is in heaven and all that is in the earth have come to exist at His bidding, and by His Will all have stepped out of utter nothingness into the world of being.²²

All praise to the unity of God, and all honor to Him, the sovereign Lord, the incomparable and all-glorious Ruler of the universe, Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation, and Who, rescuing His creatures from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction, hath received them into His kingdom of incorruptible glory.²³

The apparent contradiction is resolved, however, by the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, both of whom state that "nothingness" in this context is not meant literally, as an absolute nonexistence which is replaced by existence in an act of *creatio ex nihilo*. Writing of the second quotation from Bahá'u'lláh immediately above, Shoghi Effendi stated, through his secretary:

The statement in the "Gleanings", pp. 64-65, "who out of utter nothingness . . ." etc., should be taken in a symbolic and not a literal sense. It is only to demonstrate the power and greatness of God.²⁴

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke repeatedly to this question. In one instance, He states that "existence and nonexistence are both relative. If it be said that such a thing came into existence from nonexistence, this does not refer to absolute nonexistence, but means that its former condition in relation to its actual condition was nothingness."²⁵

If we re-examine the passage from the Tablet of Wisdom, it is quite clear that Bahá'u'lláh is affirming the eternity of the universe, while at the same time upholding the truth of whatever has been revealed in the sacred Scriptures. Even if we assume that His reference to the sacred Scriptures is intended to engage in the mind of His reader a more or less common understanding of these texts—that the universe was created in time and from nothing—it seems clear that He is not doing so in order to *affirm* that understanding. Bahá'u'lláh juxtaposes two truths, which many thought to be opposed to one another, and proceeds to elucidate their compatibility. One can affirm the scriptural concept of creation since the universe is dependent on a cause, exists through something other than itself, and is therefore contingent. This fact entails a preexistence on the part of its Cause, but a preexistence which is ontological rather than temporal. The fact that the universe has always existed does not confer upon it an eternity identical to the eternity of God, for the latter exists at an infinitely higher place in the hierarchy of being.

This same juxtaposition and resolution was offered in another place by Bahá'u'lláh, where He writes:

As to thy question whether the physical world is subject to any limitations, know thou that the comprehension of this matter dependeth upon the observer himself. In one sense, it is limited; in another, it is exalted beyond all limitations. The one true God hath everlastingly existed, and will everlastingly continue to exist. His creation, likewise, hath had no beginning, and will have no end. All that is created, however, is preceded by a cause.²⁶

In the Lawh-i-'Abdu'r-Razzáq, Bahá'u'lláh offers yet another manner of approach, one which introduces a fundamental concept for Bahá'í cosmogony. In it, Bahá'u'lláh again addresses an individual who had posed a "question concerning the origin of creation."²⁷ He first answers that the beginning of creation "hath had no beginning," that it "hath existed from eternity, and will continue to exist forever."²⁸ He then refers to a well-known *hadíth* that could be understood to imply a *creatio ex nihilo*:

As to those sayings, attributed to the Prophets of old, such as, "In the beginning was God; there was no creature to know Him," and "The Lord was alone; with no one to adore Him," the meaning of these and similar sayings is clear and evident, and should at no time be misapprehended. To this same truth bear witness these words which He hath revealed: "God was alone; there was none else besides Him. He will always remain what He hath ever been." Every discerning eye will readily perceive that the Lord is now manifest, yet there is none to recognize His glory. By this is meant that the habitation wherein the Divine Being dwelleth is far above the reach and ken of any one besides Him. . . . He will, for ever, remain immea-

surably exalted above any one except Himself.²⁹

This is similar to the resolution examined above. The sayings of the Prophets that imply a time when God existed *prior* to the existence of anything else are interpreted by Bahá’u’lláh to point to an ontological priority, not a temporal one. God can always be described as being “alone,” for His is an absolute existence, while all else is contingent and caused, acquiring existence from the will of another.

But He continues in this Tablet to provide a unique turn on this cosmogonic issue, assimilating its cosmic level to an historical dimension. The Manifestations of God are offered as one of the intended referents in the scriptural passages that speak of God and His creation. The various names by which the reality with cosmic causal significance are known in the Bahá’í writings and which are understood to have “created” all things—the Will, the Word, the Command—are related to the Manifestations of God in such a way as to imbue Their activity with cosmogonic meaning. Thus, Bahá’u’lláh offers an additional elucidation of those texts that speak of God “before” creation in the context of the earthly mission of His Manifestations:

Consider the hour at which the supreme Manifestation of God revealeth Himself unto men. Ere that hour cometh, the Ancient Being, Who is still unknown of men and hath not as yet given utterance to the Word of God, is Himself the All-Knower in a world devoid of any man that hath known Him. He is indeed the Creator without a creation. For at the very moment preceding His Revelation, each and every created thing shall be made to yield up its soul to God. This is indeed the Day of which it hath been written: “Whose shall be the Kingdom this Day?” And none can be found ready to answer!³⁰

This plurality of cosmogonic levels is essential to the Bahá’í mythic structure, and allows the creativity of God to be perceived in concrete moments of sacred time. By virtue of its capacity for extension to diverse levels of experience and reality, cosmogonic symbolism reverberates throughout humanity’s diverse modes of life, be they personal, cultural, historical, spiritual, or political. As will be seen, the thread that ties the cosmogony to all aspects of the sacred in the Bahá’í worldview is the concept of the Will of God.

The next passage from the Tablet of Wisdom reads:

Indeed He was a hidden treasure. This is a station that can never be described nor even alluded to. And in the station of ‘I did wish to make Myself known,’ God was, and His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning, apart from its being preceded by a Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness and originated by a Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning.³¹

There are two narratives embraced by this passage; one of symbol and metaphor, and one of a more rational, philosophical discourse. Both narratives have a long heritage of development, and both are essential to Bahá’í cosmogony. Over the next few pages we will call these, respectively, the myth of the Hidden Treasure and the paradox of causality.

The Myth of the Hidden Treasure

The myth of the Hidden Treasure springs ultimately from a *hadíth qudsí*—a recorded utterance of Muhammad, His companions or Imams, which has as part of its text an ascription of a saying to God Himself.³² Though providing the substance of contemplation for countless Muslim mystics over time, this particular *hadíth qudsí* was generally repudiated by the *hadíth* scholars.³³ It is not found in any of the six canonical collections of *hadíth* recognized by Sunnis and most Shí’ites as authentic and authoritative. Nonetheless, it is quoted, cited, and alluded to in a great many places in the Bahá’í writings, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a celebrated commentary on it while in His teens.³⁴

While there are a number of variants of the Hidden Treasure *hadíth*, the form which is cited here in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat* and upon which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote His commentary can be translated as follows:

I was a Hidden Treasure. I did wish (or love) to make Myself known, so I created the Creation that I might be known.

The Tablet of Wisdom distinguishes between two “stations” (*maqámát*) of God or of Being in this *hadíth*. The first station is that of the Hidden Treasure, so transcendent that it is beyond description or even allusion. With reference to this station, it is impossible to ascribe existence to anything other than the divine Essence. In His commentary on this *hadíth*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote:

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And that Essence of Primal Oneness, in that most great station in which it is said: “There was God and there was naught else besides Him,” is called by the names: the Hidden Treasure, the Hidden Ipseity, the Absolute Unity, Pure Essence, Absolute Non-specificity, the Hidden of the Hidden, the Primal Mystery, the Absolute Unknown, the Indescribable One, the Undiscoverable One and other Names.³⁵

The second station, of “I did wish to make Myself known,” is the station at which God can be addressed by names and attributes, including “the Creator.” As such, He has a creation, which is contingent yet eternally existent. These two stations are also distinguished in a prayer of Bahá’u’lláh:

I testify that Thou wast a hidden Treasure wrapped within Thine immemorial Being and an impenetrable Mystery enshrined in Thine own Essence. Wishing to reveal Thyself, Thou didst call into being the Greater and the Lesser Worlds, and didst choose Man above all Thy creatures, and didst make Him a sign of both of these worlds, O Thou Who art our Lord, the Most Compassionate!³⁶

The creative activity of the second stage can be referred to as the Word, as in this verse: “Thou didst wish to make Thyself known unto men; therefore, Thou didst, through a word of Thy mouth, bring creation into being and fashion the universe.”³⁷ The Word of God, in turn, depends upon the agency of God’s Will (*mashíyyat*) and Purpose (*irádih*):

I testify that no sooner had the First Word proceeded, through the potency of Thy will and purpose, out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized, and all that are in the heavens and all that are on earth were stirred to the depths.³⁸

In the myth of the Hidden Treasure, we can discern the classic cosmogonic pair of chaos and cosmos. The station of the Hidden Treasure corresponds to chaos, for at this stage the universe is considered as nothingness, while God’s Essence is an impenetrable abyss, in which it is impossible to identify characteristics or structure. At the station of “I did wish to make Myself known,” there comes the appearance of order (cosmos), a clear relationship between Creator and creation in pursuance of a definite purpose. The concept which mediates between these two sides of the semantic opposition is the Will. It is the Will which brings creation “out of the wastes of utter nothingness” —chaos—and it is “the energies of Thy Will whereby the entire creation hath been generated” that regulate the order—cosmos.

It should also be noted that the human being plays a critical role in the myth of the Hidden Treasure.³⁹ If the desire to be known is the cause of creation, such a desire could only be fulfilled in the creation of a being with the capacity for knowledge. This central role is expressed by Bahá’u’lláh in the following:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation . . .⁴⁰

As with the cosmos/chaos pair, the semantic opposition of known/unknown, which, in the myth of the Hidden Treasure is the tension behind the decision of God to create, is mediated by the Will of God. Not only is the Will responsible for the creation of the capacity to know, it is the Manifestation of that Will in the Prophets and Messengers that mediates between the latency of this capacity and its actual fulfillment. Perhaps the clearest expression of the identity of the Will with the Prophets is this passage from the Báb: “It is this Primal Will which appeareth resplendent in every Prophet and speaketh forth in every revealed Book.”⁴¹ That humanity’s knowledge of God is possible only through the Manifestations is a central theme throughout the Bahá’í writings, for it is the Manifestation of God “Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation.”⁴²

The cosmogonic concepts of the myth of the Hidden Treasure are used at a variety of levels. In the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, we see them employed at the level of cosmogony proper, in terms of the creation of the universe. But these concepts are also central to the Bahá’í view of sacred history, in which cycles of time are initiated by the appearance of a Manifestation of the Primal Will, a Prophet who transmits God’s message to humanity and lays the foundation for a new civilization. All of the same elements are present. The moment before the Prophet reveals Himself, there is a “Creator without a creation,”⁴³ a chaos in which God is utterly hidden. The “works and acts of each and every one of these Manifestations of God” are assimilated to the creative activity of God,

inasmuch as they “are a reflection of His Will and Purpose.”⁴⁴ At both levels, creation is effected through the Word. There is even a parallel in the distinction between the two stations of God described above and the two stations of the Manifestations explained by Bahá’u’lláh in the Kitáb-i-*qán*. At the level of God’s Oneness—the Hidden Treasure—no attributes or names can be affirmed, since the Essence is identical only with Itself and transcends description. Similarly, in “the station of pure abstraction and essential unity,”⁴⁵ all of the Prophets are one, and no distinctions can be made between them. In the station of wishing to be known, God is named by definite attributes, each of which has a concomitant effect—i.e., God is the Creator and therefore has His creation. Reflecting this, the Prophets have a “station of distinction,” in which “[e]ach one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfils a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation.”⁴⁶ Their “particular Revelation” corresponds to the creation of a new civilization in the era in which They appear.

The Paradox of Causality

Turning to the second narrative, we find the perplexing statement that the universe, though eternal, is preceded by a “Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness and originated by a Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning.”⁴⁷ Our understanding of this paradox of causality, insofar as any understanding is possible, will be facilitated by a brief look at its development in Islamic thought.

Greek philosophy, which the Islamic world studied and absorbed, contrasted two traditions of the idea of God or the Absolute. In Aristotelian thought, God is the First Cause, the Unmoved Mover who is ultimately responsible for all motion. From this perspective, God is the highest link in a chain of causality, and is therefore directly connected to His effects. The Neoplatonic tradition, on the other hand, emphasized the transcendence of God or “the One.” This latter tradition—at least insofar as it is based in the works of Plotinus—held that any name for God is merely a symbol for an unknowable reality, a reality which is the ground of the chain of being rather than its apex. For example, in the *Enneads*, Plotinus writes:

The name “the one” is merely a denial of multiplicity. The Pythagoreans signified it symbolically among one another through the term Apollo [a-pollón: “not many”], by apophasis of the many. If the one is to be taken as a positing, name, and referent, we would express ourselves more clearly if we did not speak its name at all. We speak it so that we can begin our search with that which signifies the most simple, ending with the apophasis of even that.⁴⁸

How can one say that it is a being among beings, something to which a thus can be applied? It is other than all things that are “thus.”⁴⁹

There is certainly a hierarchy of causes in Neoplatonism—the chain of hypostases—but the link between the two highest orders of being in this hierarchy is of a different nature than the link between the highest order of the hierarchy and that unutterable reality that transcends yet embraces the chain of being in its totality.

The Islamic philosophical discourse on these issues can also be schematized into two similarly contrasting traditions. Islamic theology could be called apophatic in a general sense, in that it could not but affirm the all-important principle of *tawhíd*, divine unity, and that “there is nothing like Him.”⁵⁰ Yet there is a broad divide between, on the one hand, such philosophers as Ibn Síná (Avicenna, d. 1037 C.E.) or al-Farábí (d. 950 C.E.), for whom it is legitimate to represent God as the First Cause, the Necessary Being; and on the other hand, such Shí’ite thinkers as the Ismá’ílí Abú Ya’qúb Sijistání (tenth century) or *Shaykh* Ahmad al-Ahsá’í (d. 1826), for whom the ascription to God of being a cause (*‘illa*) is little less than heresy.

In early Ismá’ílí thought, the cause of causes (*‘illat al-‘illal*) is not God, but rather the First Intellect, which is the first originated being.⁵¹ God is not delimited or defined by creation because, to these thinkers, a cause is necessarily delimited and qualified by its effect. The appearance of an effect confers the quality of causation upon its cause. Inasmuch as an effect rises *necessarily* from its cause, as heat does from fire, God envisioned as first cause would cease to be free. Rather, the first cause, the cause of all secondary causes, is said to have been *made to cause* those causes by God. It is not directly caused by God, but is rather *originated* (*abda’*) by Him. It may seem like wordplay, but the essential point of this argument is that God is not the first cause in the great chain of causes and effects, for if this were the case God would then be similar to those secondary causes and their effects. Rather, God is the Origin (*mubdi’*) of the First Intellect, the latter being identified with

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the Word or the Unity (*wahda*).⁵² From this first originated being (*al-mubda' al-awwal*), all things are produced through emanation (*inbi'áth* or *fiyd*). The chain of causation begins here, functioning in much the same way as in the Neoplatonic hierarchy.⁵³

In the works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá'í one finds many parallels to the metaphysical doctrines of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths. Like the philosophers of early Ismá'ílism, Shaykh Ahmad drew upon the teachings of the Shí'í Imáms in elaborating his thought. One reported saying of the sixth Imám, Ja'fár as-Sádiq, was particularly important for the Shaykh's understanding of creation. In this enigmatic statement, quoted abundantly by Shaykh Ahmad, the Imám says: "God created the Will (*mashiyyat*) through itself (*bi-nafsihá*), and created all things (*al-ashyá'a*) through the Will."⁵⁴

One can see from this statement how Shaykh Ahmad may have developed a notion similar to that of the early Ismá'ílís, in which God is not seen as the direct cause of creation but as the origin of the first cause. In fact, Shaykh Ahmad did exactly that, though not in the same terms. He took this teaching of Imám Sádiq and laid it at the foundation of his metaphysics. For Shaykh Ahmad, the "acting" of an agent is distinct from both the agent itself and the act for which the acting is a process of occasioning.

If the Primal Will created itself, or was created by itself, does God then have no connection with the universe? Is there not a circularity in the idea of a self-created Will? Shaykh Ahmad is emphatic in answering both of these questions in the negative. He explains that *mashiyyat* is God's acting, and an acting⁵⁵ depends upon an agent of that acting for its subsistence.⁵⁶ He defines the mode of subsistence by which the acting of an agent has its own distinct being as "subsistence of emanation," or "processional subsistence" (*qiyám as-Sudúrí*).⁵⁷ Thus, the Primal Will is contingent upon God for its being, and could be conceptualized as God's "process of emanating." Yet, he insists that the Emanator, the process of emanating, and the end-result emanation are three distinct realities, which he classifies on the cosmological scale as Real Being (*al-wujúd al-haqq*), Absolute Being (*al-wujúd al-mutlaq*), and Delimited Being (*al-wujúd al-muqayyad*).⁵⁸ In the case of the Primal Will, it is dependent on God for its existence but is at the same time its own cause. Shaykh Ahmad points out that a process-of-willing is not coequal with the actor upon whom this process depends, nor is it the same as the willed result. Further, the process-of-willing does not come to be through anything other than itself, for if it did we would have to say that it came to be through another process-of-willing which in turn depended upon a third process-of-willing, around and around in an infinite regress.⁵⁹ Thus, the Primal Will can be seen as its own cause, while yet remaining contingent in relation to God, the Real Being.

In Bábí and Bahá'í texts, we can find both of these approaches to the affirmation of God's transcendence. As in early Ismá'ílí doctrine, God is not the cause of causes but the Originator of the cause of causes; and as with Shaykh Ahmad, the traditional statement of the Imám Ja'fár as-Sádiq is cited in evidence of God's independence from receiving qualification from His effects.

These strains are the background to the statement under discussion, that "His creation had ever existed beneath His shelter from the beginning that hath no beginning, apart from its being preceded by a Firstness which cannot be regarded as firstness and originated by a Cause inscrutable even unto all men of learning."⁶⁰ From one perspective, the Firstness (*awwal*) is not a firstness (*lá awwal*) due to the fact that creation is not "after" God in a temporal sense. But further, it is not even "after" God as an effect is "after" a cause. The Primal Will, while it constitutes an actional quality of God, is its own cause. It is the Primal Will which in turn is the agent of the creation of the universe. God's "firstness" in relation to the Primal Will is ambiguous, for the Primal Will is the cause of the Primal Will. But on the other hand, the "firstness" of the Primal Will is not absolute, for its very being is God's activity.

A few pages later in the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, Bahá'u'lláh seems to employ language similar to the Ismá'ílís to indicate these distinctions, when He says that "such men as were the source and the wellspring of Wisdom never denied the moving Impulse [*'illa*] behind these causes, nor the Creator [*mubdi'*] or the Origin [*mabda'*] thereof."⁶¹ This language appears to mirror the Ismá'ílí notion of the First Intellect or Primal Will as the cause (*'illa*) of causes, with God as the originator (*mubdi'*) of the First Intellect. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reiterates this principle in several places, such as in the following: "He, the invisible, the lofty and the incomprehensible, is preceded by no cause but rather is the Originator of the cause of causes."⁶²

The writings of the Báb display a nearly identical use of terms to distinguish the creativity of God from the

creativity of the Primal Will as first “cause.” Todd Lawson has cited passages from the Báb’s earliest work—the Tafsír Súrat al-baqara—that employ the terms *ibdá’* (origination, from the same root as *mubdi’*) and *ikhti-ra’* (invention) in what Lawson describes as the Báb’s “distinctive cosmogony entailing twin creative processes.”⁶³ The employment of these and similar pairs of terms to make this same distinction has a rich tradition in Islamic philosophy, and is not confined to Ismá‘ílí cosmology. As William Chittick notes:

For many Muslim thinkers, “innovation” [*ibdá’*] is God’s creation without intermediary, whereas “creation” (*khalq*) refers to his creation by means of a preexistent something. Thus one can say that God “innovated” the intellect, but he “created” everything by means of the intellect.⁶⁴

As to the saying of Ja‘fár as-Sádiq, this is also quoted and discussed in the Bábí and Bahá’í writings. Saiedi has noted that in the Báb’s *Sahífiy-i-‘Adlíyyih* (Book of Justice), the Báb “explains that God created the Primal Will from nothing through the causation of the Will itself without any external determination, and created all other beings by the causation of the Will . . .”⁶⁵ In *His Súriy-i-tawhíd*, the Báb expounds the doctrine at some length, explicitly citing the Imáms, and identifying the Primal Will with the First Remembrance, which can be understood to refer to the archetypal reality of the Manifestation of God.⁶⁶ This latter element of the Báb’s treatment of this idea is expressed in another Tablet in which God addresses the Báb, as His Manifestation, in these words:

In truth I have created Thee through Thyself, then at My Own behest I have fashioned all things through the creative power of Thy Word. We are All-Powerful. I have appointed Thee to be the Beginning and the End, the Seen and the Hidden.⁶⁷

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also quotes the tradition of Imám Ja‘fár, though in a slightly different form. This is in a commentary on the very passages of the *Lawh-i-Hikmat* being examined here, and is cited in the course of explaining the segment which is the substance of the next stage of our inquiry, to which we now proceed.

That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form thou seest today. The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force [*fá’il*] and that which is its recipient [*munfa’il*]. These two are the same, yet they are different. . . . Such as communicate the generating influence [*fá’ilayn*] and such as receive its impact [*munfa’ilayn*] are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God which is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof.⁶⁸

In a Tablet to *Shaykh* ‘Alí-Akbar *Qúchání*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elucidates and interprets the above paragraph from the *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, as well as a later passage concerning Nature.⁶⁹ After quoting the first sentence of the above, He writes: “From this blessed verse it is clear and evident that the universe is evolving. In the opinion of the philosophers and the wise this fact of the growth and evolution of the world of existence is also established. That is to say, it is progressively transferred from state to state.”⁷⁰

Concerning the next sentence, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

The world of existence came into being through the heat generated . . . that is to say: The matter [*máddih*] and primary matter [*hayúlá*, Greek *hylé*] of contingent beings is the ethereal power, which is invisible and known only through its effects, such as electricity, heat, and light—these are vibrations of that power, and this is established and proven in natural philosophy and is known as the ethereal matter [*máddíyyih-áthíríyyih*]. This ethereal matter is itself both the active force (*fá’il*) and the recipient (*munfa’il*); in other words, it is the sign of the Primal Will in the phenomenal world. “God created man by the Primal Will and the Primal Will by itself.” The ethereal matter is, therefore, the active force since light, heat and electricity appear from it. It is also the recipient, for as vibrations take place in it, they become visible.⁷¹

This verse and its commentary has brought us to the heart of Bahá’í cosmogony. This cosmogonic narrative—of the creative interaction of active and passive forces—is the model for Bahá’í sacred narrative at every level.

This narrative describes a creative unfoldment with respect to three levels of being. The first level is God, and it is His acting—self-caused yet contingent—that occupies the second level. To this level can be given the more-or-less equivalent names of the Word, the Command, or the Primal Will of God. The third level is that of the creation, the phenomenal world. Earlier we noted that *Shaykh* Ahmad sets forth a similar model, giving

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the three levels the names Real Being, Absolute Being, and Delimited Being. The God-Command-Creation scheme is emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a number of places, such as in *Some Answered Questions*, where we find Him saying:

[T]he Sufis admit God and the creature, and say that God resolves Himself into the infinite forms of the creatures, and manifests like the sea, which appears in the infinite forms of the waves. These phenomenal and imperfect waves are the same thing as the Preexistent Sea, which is the sum of all the divine perfections. The Prophets, on the contrary, believe that there is the world of God, the world of the Kingdom, and the world of Creation: three things.⁷²

The Lawh-i-Hikmat describes the dynamics of the relationships between these three levels in terms of *process* and *semantic opposition*. At the level of the world of God, there is no tension between opposites, nor any duality. God is the *coincidentia oppositorum*, in Whom essence is identical with existence. All divine attributes and names, which include polarities such as justice and mercy, merge into one at the level of the Unknowable Essence, of the Hidden Treasure. This is elegantly expressed by Shaykh Ahmad in his *al-Fawá'id al-Hikmiyyah*:

With respect to His Quintessence (Glorified is He!), however, the matter is counter to that which is possible with respect to creation. So from a single aspect He is Lofty in His Proximity, Proximate in His Loftiness. From a single aspect He is the Manifest in His Occulting, the Occult in His Manifesting. From a single aspect He is the First through His Lastness, the Last through His Firstness.⁷³

This is an eternal and immutable state, described earlier as the station of the Hidden Treasure. The station of God’s desire to be known can be identified with the second level, the world of Command. This second level is God’s acting (*fi’l*), His Primal Will which was created through itself. It is here that the first trace of duality arises, a duality infinitely more subtle than the duality prevailing in the world of creation. From what is below it, the world of Command appears as a perfect unity, but in relation to God it is nothing. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said

Though the ‘First Mind’ [the Primal Will] is without beginning, it does not become a sharer in the preexistence of God, for the existence of the universal reality in relation to the existence of God is nothingness, and it has not the power to become an associate of God and like unto Him in preexistence.⁷⁴

But what exactly is this duality in the World of Command, and what, at this level, do the active and passive forces signify? In looking for the answers in the Bahá’í writings, we find an abundance of codes employed. These codes use symbols drawn from the Qur’án and traditions of Islamic thought, from Greek philosophy, even from the esoteric science of alchemy. We’ll here explore several prominent “codes” relevant to the mythic dimension at other levels of the Bahá’í teachings, and that are thus part of the experience of the sacred in the modern-day Bahá’í community.

One code for the expression of the creative tension in the world of Command derives from the Qur’anic creation myth. In it, a prominent theme concerns the word “Be,” by which God brings things into existence. There are eight verses that employ the formula, one of which reads: “Verily, His Command, when He intends a thing, is only that He says to it, “Be!” —and it is!”⁷⁵

The Arabic word for “be” is *kun*, from the three-letter root *káf* (K), *wáw* (W, Ú), and *nún* (N). The imperative form used in these Qur’anic verses is written with just the two consonants *káf* and *nún*. Islamic thinkers developed a number of symbolic interpretations of these verses, in which the *káf* and the *nún* were seen to represent primordial entities engaged instrumentally by God’s creative Command. One common interpretation coupled this verse with the first verse of the sixty-eighth *Súrih* of the Qur’án: “Nún. By the Pen and that which they write.”⁷⁶ The *káf* was identified with the Pen, which is used symbolically in Islamic and Bahá’í texts for the Primal Will or First Intelligence; while one of *nún*’s literal meanings—“inkpot”—was exploited to provide a symbol for the passive counterpart to the active Pen.⁷⁷

In an early Ismá’ílí text by Abú Ya’qúb Sijistání (tenth century), we find a passage concerning the “significance of ascribing the Command of God to these two letters—that is, to the *káf* and the *nún*,” in which it is explained that

anything having either a spiritual or a corporeal nature cannot appear except as one of a pair, [regardless of] whether it is sublime or mundane. Because the Command of God, the Almighty, initiates the formation

of such pairs, it is represented by two letters so that it will be understood that God’s Command is the cause of everything in which duality is found to exist. . . . As joined together in this word whose very being derives from the Command of God, these two letters are witness on the part of every pair of creatures, each one being paired with its partner, just as the *káf* is the mate of the *nún*, that this condition in all cases derives from the Command of God, the Most High.⁷⁸

Later in the same work, Sijistání writes: “The first cause which is the oneness is called “the Word [*kalima*] of God,” glorious is His majesty and it—that is, *kalima*—has four letters. . . . The *káf* [in *kalima*] corresponds to intellect, since it is the principle of existences and the origin of higher and lower substances, and in it is the seed of corporeal and spiritual forms. This is like saying that the totality of all creatures appears with the *kun* [of the divine Command *kun*] even before the *nún*.”⁷⁹

These passages envision the two letters of the *kun* representing the principle of duality, a principle manifest throughout contingent being, but with its source in the Command rather than in God. Sijistání states that everything in existence is one of a pair; this perhaps derives from the many statements in the Qur’án to the effect that all things were created in pairs.⁸⁰ Sijistání also relates the *káf-nún* duality to the composite nature of all things, in which are necessarily combined matter and form.⁸¹ He notes that the *káf* in *kun* is vowelless (*muta-harrík*; a term used to signify a vowelless consonant, but lit. “in motion”), while *nún* in the word *kun* is not vowelless (i.e., carries a *sukún*, which means literally “silence, repose, rest”). This is then related to the activity of *káf* and the passivity of *nún*, which are further said to be symbolic of prime matter and form, respectively.⁸²

In the work of Shaykh Ahmad, the symbols of these two letters are treated similarly. The *káf* and the *nún* are the active and passive forces which interact at the World of Command and thereby produce the lower realms of existence; in his terminology, they constitute the dynamics of Absolute Being by which Delimited Being is generated. The *káf* is said to symbolize the Will of God (*mashíyat*), and *nún*, His Purpose (*irádih*). For Shaykh Ahmad, in each composite thing existence is active while essence is passive. Will is responsible for the creation of the first while Purpose is responsible for the creation of the second.⁸³

In the Báb’s *Tafsír-i-Bismilláh ar-Rahmán ar-Rahím*, the same equation is made between these two letters and the respective stages of Will and Purpose. He writes that the Will, represented by *káf*, is the father of all things and is responsible for the creation of matter. Purpose, represented by *nún*, is the mother of all things and is responsible for the creation of form.⁸⁴ The matter/form pair is closely related with that of existence/essence mentioned by Shaykh Ahmad.

In the works of Bahá’u’lláh the “code” of the *káf* and the *nún* are also employed as symbols for the process whereby cosmic creativity—through which the World of Creation issues from the World of Command by the instrumentality of the Will of God—is assimilated to the creative power of the Manifestation of God, through Whom human life and civilization is revolutionized and reformed. The symbol is used in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 177, where it is translated as “the letters B and E.” In the notes to that text we read: “Shoghi Effendi, in letters written on his behalf, has explained the significance of the ‘letters B and E.’ They constitute the word ‘Be,’ which, he states, ‘means the creative Power of God Who through His command causes all things to come into being’ and ‘the power of the Manifestation of God, His great spiritual creative force.’”⁸⁵

As mentioned above, the *káf* and the *nún* have also been identified with three other pairs of active and passive realities: existence and essence, matter (or substance) and form, and Will and Purpose. The first two pairs can be treated together, as they revolve around similar philosophical problems. The Aristotelian concept of hylomorphism (from *hylé*, prime matter, and *morphé*, form) holds any given thing to be composed of a potential material element and an actual formal element. The active/passive values to these categories, however, are reversed in Shaykhí and Bahá’í texts, so that the active half of this pair is considered to be matter (*mádda*) or substance (*jawhar*) rather than form (*súrat*). The question of existence and essence embraces a history of philosophical speculation distinct from the question of hylomorphism. It was of major concern and the subject of lively debate in Islamic philosophy from the time of Ibn Síná, and can be summarized as the question of whether a thing was primarily a mode of existence to which an essence functioned as a qualifying accident, or, on the other hand, an essential reality to which existence was the qualifying accident allowing it to appear in outward manifestation.

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In the Bahá'í writings, the two questions—of hylomorphism and existence over essence—are answered in essentially the same way. Any given thing in the universe is seen as a composite in which matter or substance is an active element “received” by a delimiting form. In the same way, existence is the act, closely identified with the Will, and essence is the particular reception of this act by which a thing comes to be as it is. The two elements are simultaneous in the coming-into-being of the thing, each of them necessary. The “thingness” of the thing lies in neither essence nor existence, but rather both of them through their interaction. However, matter or existence is higher in the hierarchy of being, as it depends solely on God’s acting, while form or essence depends on matter/existence for its subsistence. Matter is called the “father,” form the “mother,” but both are necessary in the “procreation” of the thing. These points are variously expressed in the following quotations:

For example it has been stated that all things are composed of two elements: the “receiver” [qábil] and the “received” [maqbúl]. By “received” is meant substance [mádda] and primary matter [huyúlá] and by “receiver” is meant the form [súrat] and shape which confines and limits the primary matter from its state of indefiniteness and freedom to the courtyard of limitation and definite form.⁸⁶

[I]t is not possible for a thing to have an external existence and not to be formed into a shape because substance [mádda] and primal matter [hayúlá] in order to exist need form[súrat], while shape and form in order to appear need substance.⁸⁷

The sun is born from substance [máddih] and form [súrat], which can be compared to father and mother, and it is absolute perfection; but the darkness has neither substance nor form, neither father nor mother, and it is absolute imperfection.⁸⁸

Some think that the body is the substance [jawhar] and exists by itself, and that the spirit [rúh] is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul [nafs an-nátiqih] is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident—that is to say, the body—be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains . . . the rational soul is the substance through which the body exists.⁸⁹

Certainly, that which is the substance [jawhar] is superior to that which is the accident, for the substance is the origin, and the accident is the consequence; the substance depends on itself, while the accident is dependent on something else; that is to say, it needs a substance upon which to depend.⁹⁰

The inseparability of the halves of these pairs casts light on the statements of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá regarding the ethereal matter quoted above. Another aspect of the unity of active and passive is that they are both manifestations of the one Primal Will.

The other pair seen in the *káf* and the *nún* is that of *mashíyyat* and *irádih*, Will and Purpose. These are related to the creative energies of the Command mentioned in the verses of the Qur’án that speak of the word *kun*, such as the one already quoted:

Verily, His Command, when He intends [iradih] a thing, is only that He says to it, “Be!” —and it is!⁹¹

Will is mentioned in a similar fashion:

Alláh createth what He will [yashá’, same rt. as *mashíyyat*]. If He decreeth [qadá] a thing, He saith unto it only: Be! [kun] and it is.⁹²

In the context of the Bahá'í writings, Will and Purpose are the two highest degrees of a seven-stage schema which describes the process of the generation of all things, from the apex of the World of Command down to their appearance in the world of creation. This schema goes back to a saying of the sixth Imám, Ja‘fár as-Sádiq, which mentions the following degrees: Will (*mashíyyat*), Purpose (*iráda*), Determination (*qadar*), Decree (*qadá*), Permission (*idhn*), Fixed Time (*ajal*), and Book (*kitáb*).⁹³ Nader Saiedi has discussed this scheme in a recent work, in which he notes that the “heart of these seven stages of creation is the union between existence and essence.”⁹⁴

Beginning with treatment of this question in *Shaykh Ahmad*, the stage of Will is related to the creation of existence, and Purpose with the creation of essence and its linking to existence.⁹⁵ Returning to the Báb’s Tafsír-i-Bismilláh ar-Rahmán ar-Rahím already referred to above, it will be remembered that He equated *káf* with Will, *nún* with Purpose, and ascribes the creation of matter (*mádda*) to the former and of form (*súrat*) to the

latter. He states that Will is the father of all things, Purpose their mother, and then he relates this to a saying attributed to Rahmán in which the latter is reported to have stated that he and ‘Alí were the father and mother, respectively, of all Muslims.⁹⁶ We begin to see from these sets of mutually implicating pairs how the dialectic at the level of cosmogony can be assimilated to spiritual history.

We have already seen Bahá’u’lláh employing the concepts of Will and Purpose as interrelated counterparts to the cosmic creation . . . “—no sooner had the First Word proceeded, through the potency of Thy will and purpose, out of His mouth, and the First Call gone forth from His lips than the whole creation was revolutionized . . .” —but He also refers to this process as the agency in the bringing into being of the laws and principles by which His community is organized: “. . . grant that Thy servants may not be kept back from this Divine Law [*sharí‘ah*] which, at Thy will [*mashíyyat*] and according to Thy pleasure [*iráda*], hath branched from Thy most great Ocean.”⁹⁷

In the following key passage from the Lawh-i-Hikmat, “Such as communicate the generating influence [*fá’i-layn*] and such as receive its impact [*munfa’ilayn*] are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God which is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof,”⁹⁸ the words *fá’i-layn* and *munfa’ilayn* could be literally translated as the *twin agents* and the *twin patients*. Bahá’u’lláh has identified the *fá’i-layn* as fire and water and the *munfa’ilayn* as air and earth.⁹⁹ In other places, the Bahá’í writings engage the Graeco-Islamic tradition on this question, in which the two agents could be defined as heat and cold, and the two patients moistness and dryness, with the four elements themselves thus composed of active and passive natures.¹⁰⁰ One could read this verse as saying that the Word of God is responsible for the creation of the four Classical categories of elements and natures, which interact with each other in the composition of all physical things. It can also be read as a reference to the dialectics of Will and Purpose and of Determination and Decree within the World of Command.

These first four degrees of the Báb’s seven-stage schema are often treated as a distinct quaternity by both Shaykh Ahmad and the Báb. In the Persian Bayán, the Báb dazzles the reader with over a dozen interrelated symbolic quaternities, including (1) Will, (2) Purpose, (3) Determination, (4) Decree; and (1) fire, (2) air, (3) water, and (4) earth. In the former, Will and Determination are the active counterparts of the passive elements of Purpose and Decree. Thus, we can align these concepts to the verse in the Lawh-i-Hikmat, in that the *fá’i-layn*, the two agents of fire and water, are equated in the Bayánic quaternary symbolism with the active categories of Will and Determination, while the *munfa’ilayn*, the two patients of air and earth, are equated with Purpose and Decree. Following Shaykh Ahmad, the Bayánic quaternities are divisions or stages of the one Act or Acting of God, known also as the Primal Will.¹⁰¹ The unity of the twin realities in the Primal Will can be seen as identical to the unity of the four realities, but with the latter there is a greater measure of dynamic complexity.¹⁰²

Verily, the Word of God is the Cause that hath preceded the contingent world—a world which is adorned with the splendours of the Ancient of Days, yet is being renewed and regenerated at all times.¹⁰³

From the elements of Bahá’í cosmogony already surveyed, it is clear that creation is not a single, unique event, from which time and creation stretch passively on. The activity of the divine Will is constant, and it is upon this ceaseless activity that each existing thing depends. In the above passage from the Lawh-i-Hikmat, an additional element to this relationship is introduced. The divine Will provides not simply a constant ground of being for all existent things; it is responsible at every moment for the creation of the cosmos. This is entailed by the active/passive categories in the Bahá’í writings.

There is a constant transformation of form and essence that constitutes the appearance of change and development in the things around us. If we think of this transformation as existential motion, then the cause of such motion will be either the forms that appear to be flitting from state to state, or it will be the substance (or existence) which these forms delimit and define into a particular thing. If the existential motion is caused by the nature of the forms, then form is active. If it is caused by the nature of existence, then existence is active. Since it has been seen that, in Bahá’í texts, existence is the active category while essence or form is passive, we must conclude that the appearance of change and development is due to the active nature of existence (or substance).

It has also been seen that existence derives from God’s acting, from His Will. It is thus fundamentally—one could say literally—dynamic. As all particular things in the cosmos depend upon the Will, they are characterized

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by this dynamism in their very being, and cannot be considered to be “at rest” in any way. From one moment to the next, all things subsist in the ground of God’s dynamic acting, being constantly regenerated and renewed. Every instant is a cosmogonic moment, “in the beginning.”

Bahá’u’lláh is explicit about this idea of perpetual creation in the *Kitáb-i-Badí’*. Saiedi has summarized the presentation as follows:

Completion is simply and solely dependent on the will of God because creation is a continuous process. God does not create a being which then continues to exist on its own. On the contrary, everything is at every moment coming into existence and ceasing to exist. Bahá’u’lláh describes this as the continuous reflection of the different names of God, including the names of Life-Giver and Life-Taker. If nothing in the realm of creation is characterized by continuous existence, and everything is always created anew, then perfection or completion is only a matter of the divine act of creation. It is the will of God to bring into existence any being at any moment in any form He desires.¹⁰⁴

Another statement of this principle is found in Bahá’u’lláh’s *Súriy-i-Vafá*:

Know thou moreover that every created thing is continually brought forth and returned at the bidding of thy Lord, the God of power and might.¹⁰⁵

The idea of perpetual creation can also be considered as *process*, as in the following passage:

The wonders of His bounty can never cease, and the stream of His merciful grace can never be arrested. The process of His creation hath had no beginning, and can have no end.¹⁰⁶

The metaphors of breath and of sunlight have also been used in the Bahá’í writings to express this concept:

I can have no doubt that should the holy breaths of Thy loving-kindness and the breeze of Thy bountiful favor cease, for less than the twinkling of an eye, to breathe over all created things, the entire creation would perish, and all that are in heaven and on earth would be reduced to utter nothingness.¹⁰⁷

[A]ll the earth’s creatures require the bounty of the sun, for their very existence is dependent upon solar light and heat. Should they be deprived of the sun, they would be wiped out. This is the being with God, as referred to in the Holy Books: man must be with his Lord.¹⁰⁸

The doctrine of continuous cosmogony is of immense significance to the mythic dimension of the Bahá’í Faith. According to this perspective, all operations of the Will of God are creative, and all events or entities seen to represent God’s Will are endowed with the charisma of cosmogony. Likewise, the Word of God, whether in the sense of the primordial command “Be!” or in the sense of the scriptures brought by the Prophets and Messengers, is endowed with an infinite capacity to bring ever-new realities into being.

The nature of history is comprehended by Bahá’u’lláh in ways that exactly parallel the description of the cosmogonic process. As the universe is a product of God’s Will, so is the historical process seen as a manifestation of this dynamic and all-pervading reality. In the case of both cosmic unfoldment and the series of temporal events, the engine that moves the process forward is depicted as a dialectic of opposing forces. Periods of history, like the physical world, are described as springing from the Word of God, and depend upon the ceaseless divine activity of this dialectic in order to develop. At the center of both space and time stands the figure of the Manifestation of God, the vehicle of the Primal Will, at Whose appearance the world is recreated and time is begun anew. The two narratives—of creation and of history—employ the same stock of images and codes, and modern Bahá’í life is, in many ways, the performance of these narratives: the same images and codes serve to confer upon it historical meaning and world-creativity in the consciousness of those who live it.

Abbreviations

BP	<i>Bahá’í Prayers</i>
GPB	Shoghi Effendi, <i>God Passes By</i>
GWB	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh</i>
KA	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>The Kitáb-i-Aqdas</i>

Lights of ‘Irfán

KI	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>The Kitáb-i-‘qán</i>
LANZ	Shoghi Effendi, <i>Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand</i>
MF	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Memorials of the Faithful</i>
PM	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>Prayers and Meditations</i>
SAQ	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Some Answered Questions</i>
SWA	‘Abdu’l-Bahá, <i>Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá</i>
SWB	The Báb, <i>Selections from the Writings of the Báb</i>
TB	Bahá’u’lláh, <i>Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh</i>

Notes

- 1) The article presented here is, with minor modifications, the third chapter of a lengthier work, *Cosmos and Chaos: Myth, Creation, and the Bahá’í Administrative Order*, forthcoming. That work and this revised extract are greatly indebted to the generous assistance offered by too many people to mention here. While I’ll include full acknowledgements in the book, I cannot omit mention here of the constant help provided by David Bikman as a critical reader and masterful editor; by William F. McCants and Khazeh Fanapazir for similar assistance, and for help with primary sources; and to beloved Sama, Dr. Rhett Diesser, Ismael Velasco, Armin Eschraghi, Keven Brown, Erica Toussaint, Damien Adia, Dr. Iskandar Hai, Dr. Kavian Milani, Dr. Steven Phelps, Iscander Tinto, Guy Sinclair, Darach Watson, James Goldsmith, and many, many others, for all your assistance, encouragement, and friendship. Thanks also to Dr. Iraj Ayman for extending the invitation to present *Cosmos and Chaos* at the 2001 ‘Irfán Colloquium in Michigan.
- 2) *KI*, p. 168.
- 3) “Code” is here used following the myth scholar Eleazar Meletinsky, in the sense of a particular descriptive language in mythopoetic discourse. See *Poetics*, p. 210.
- 4) Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá’ís*, p. 112.
- 5) MF, p. 6. Nabil-i-Akbar was a remarkable man by any standard. Prior to becoming a Bábí (ca. 1853) he attained the rank of *muj-tahid* (a Shí’í jurist empowered to decide on matters of Islamic law), by the authority and under the tutelage of the greatest Shí’í leader of his time, Shaykh Murtadá Ansári. The latter was the sole *marja’ at-taqlid* (point of emulation in all matters of religious practice) of the entire Shí’í world, and was mentioned by Shoghi Effendi as the man “whom Bahá’u’lláh . . . extolled in the ‘Lauh-i-Sultán,’ and numbered among ‘those doctors who have indeed drunk of the cup of renunciation,’ and ‘never interfered with Him,’ and to whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred as ‘the illustrious and erudite doctor, the noble and celebrated scholar, the seal of seekers after truth.’” (*GPB* p. 143) Before studying with Shaykh Murtadá, Nabil-i-Akbar spent five years in the town of Sabzivár, attending the classes of Hájí Mullá Hádí Sabzivári (d. 1878), the most renowned Persian philosopher-mystic of the Qájár period in Iran (1794-1909), called in his day the “Plato of his time” and the “Seal of the Sages” (Nasr, *Islamic*, p. 305). Nabil-i-Akbar was eulogized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in MF (pp. 3-7), and was named by Him as one of the Hands of the Cause of God.
- 6) *TB*, p. 140.
- 7) *Revelation*, IV:39f.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 40.
- 9) *Ibid.*
- 10) *Ibid.*
- 11) *Ibid.*, p. 40f.
- 12) Momen, “Relativism.”
- 13) *Ibid.*, p. 206.
- 14) Cole, “Lauh-i-Hikmat,” web.
- 15) *Ibid.*
- 16) Taherzadeh, *Revelation*, IV:40n.
- 17) Cole makes this equation for the passage in the Lauh-i-Hikmat in “The Concept of Manifestation,” section 3: “God and the World.”
- 18) According to one author: “Nearly all recent studies on the origin of the doctrine of creatio ex nihilo have come to the conclusion that this doctrine is not native to Judaism, is nowhere attested in the Hebrew Bible, and probably arose in Christianity in the Second Century C.E. in the course of its fierce battle with Gnosticism.” (Peter Hayman, “Monotheism—A Misused Word in Jewish Studies,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 42 (1991), p. 1-15) The *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, under the article “Judaism,” adds that “[a]lthough the first chapter of Genesis affirms divine creation, it does not offer an entirely unambiguous view of the origin of the universe, as the debate over the correct understanding of Gen. 1:1 in former as in modern times discloses. (Was there or was there not a preexisting matter, void, or chaos?) Yet, basically, the interest of the author was not in the mode of creation, a later concern perhaps reflected in the various translations of the verse: “In the beginning God created,”

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- which could signify what medieval philosophers designated *creatio ex nihilo* ("creation out of nothing"); and "when God began to create," which could indicate some concept of prime matter. He was concerned rather to affirm that the totality of existence, inanimate (Gen. 1:3-19), living (20-25), and human (26-31), derived immediately from the same divine source; and, thus, that it is a universe." ("Judaism" *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*. <search.eb.com/bol/topic?eu=108153&sctn=25>). In a lengthy study of Islamic cosmogony, Dr. al-Alousi points out, in discussing the Qur'anic idea of creation (*khalāqa*) that "[t]he etymological meaning of *khalāqa* indicates creation from some material. The attempts of commentators and philologists [sic] to interpret the word in a peculiar way in the Qur'ān, that is to say in favour of creation ex-nihilo, reflect later influences" (*The Problem*, p. 22). The author meticulously combs the Qur'ān for any explicit statement of creation from nothing, and finds, not only that there is no such verse, but that there is much evidence that the Qur'ān teaches creation from something, an ordering of the cosmos by God from already-existing matter (*Ibid.*, chap. 1). This same observation regarding the Qur'anic account of creation starting from some substance rather than from nothing was made by Dr. Vahid Rafati in his article "Lawh-i-Hikmat."
- 19) MF, p. 3.
 - 20) SAQ, p. 180.
 - 21) *Ibid.*, p. 281.
 - 22) GWB, p. 318.
 - 23) *Ibid.*, p. 64f.
 - 24) LANZ, p. 41.
 - 25) SAQ, p. 281.
 - 26) GWB, p. 162.
 - 27) GWB, p. 150.
 - 28) *Ibid.*
 - 29) *Ibid.*, p. 150f.
 - 30) *Ibid.*, p. 151.
 - 31) TB, p. 140.
 - 32) Some Islamic scholars consider this tradition to be an *Isrā'iliyya*, a wisdom-saying passed down by the Jews that eventually entered the oral traditions of the early Muslims. On this question, see Roberto Tottoli, "Origin and Use of the Term *Isrā'iliyyat* in Muslim Literature." *Arabica: Journal for Arabic and Islamic Studies* 49.2 (April 1999), pp. 193-210. See also Nurbakhsh, *Traditions*, p. 13, where it is called a *hadīth qudsī* but is given as a saying of the prophet David. Nurbakhsh quotes the *hadīth* from a thirteenth-century ms.
 - 33) Chittick, *Sufi Path*, p. 391 n 14.
 - 34) GPB, 241. M. Momen has published a provisional translation of this tablet in his "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary..."
 - 35) Momen, "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary," p. 9.
 - 36) PM, p. 48f.
 - 37) BP, p. 122f.
 - 38) PM, p. 295.
 - 39) Cf. the illuminating discussion by Hodgson, *Venture*, II:222-227, on the "myth of the microcosmic return."
 - 40) GWB, p. 65.
 - 41) SWB, p. 125.
 - 42) KA, p. 21.
 - 43) GWB, p. 151.
 - 44) GWB, p. 59.
 - 45) KI, p. 152.
 - 46) *Ibid.*, p. 176.
 - 47) TB, p. 140.
 - 48) Sells, *Mystical*, p. 17. Bracket-note is Sells'.
 - 49) *Ibid.*, p. 19.
 - 50) Qur'ān 25:11.
 - 51) Makarem, *Doctrine* p. 81.
 - 52) Netton, *Alláh* p. 217.
 - 53) This is very much a simplification of early Ismá'ílí cosmogonic philosophy. For more information, refer to the works of Paul Walker, Daftary, Makarem and Netton listed in the bibliography.

- 54) Hamíd, *Metaphysics* 174n 23, my translation of the Arabic.
- 55) As awkward as it is, I've followed Shaykh Ahmad in using the gerund “acting” as opposed to “action” to highlight the distinction between an action and the process whereby that action comes into being.
- 56) *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 57) *Ibid.*, pp. 148 and 174f.
- 58) *Ibid.*, p. 97.
- 59) *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- 60) *TB*, p. 140.
- 61) *Ibid.*, p. 144.
- 62) *SWA*, p. 61; cf. *SAQ* p. 203.
- 63) *Authority of the Feminine*, p. 110, 122n 81. For examples of earlier usage of these terms in this manner by medieval Neoplatonists—Jewish and Muslim—see Altman and Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, pp. 68-74. See also below, note 121, for the usage of these terms by Shaykh Ahmad.
- 64) Chittick, *Heart* p. 77f.
- 65) *Logos*, p. 55f.
- 66) *Le Báyân Arabe*, p. 25ff.
- 67) *SWB*, p. 159.
- 68) *TB*, p. 140.
- 69) Shaykh ‘Alí-Akbar Qúchání (1871-1915) was a remarkable man, of similar distinction in knowledge as Nabí-i-Akbár, recipient of the Tablet of Wisdom. In addition to receiving his authorization to practice Islamic law from the leading *mujtahid* of his day, he was also an exponent of the philosophy of Mullá Hádí Sabzívání (see note 4 above). In this Tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addresses him as “thou who callest unto the Covenant.” He was martyred in Khurasan in 1915, and his death is mentioned by Shoghi Effendi on p. 298f. of *GPB*. The Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is published in *Má'idíy-i-Ásmání* (‘Abdu’l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí ed., 9 vols. Tehran: Mu’assisa Millí Matbú’at Amrí, 128-9 B.E.) 2:68-70, and *Amr va Khálaq*, 1:168-9. Part of a provisional translation by Keven Brown was published in the *Journal of Bahá’í Studies* 2:3 (1989-90), p. 28, in his article on the origin of matter.
- 70) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Lawh-i-Shaykh ‘Alí-Akbar Qúchání Shahíd, passage as trans. by Keven Brown, “A Bahá’í Perspective” p. 28.
- 71) From the same provisional translation by Keven Brown, partially published in *Ibid.*, p. 28. The partial translation of this passage as found there has been modified in consultation with Keven Brown.
- 72) *SAQ*, p. 295.
- 73) Hamíd, *Metaphysics* p. 344; Arabic text on p. 497f.
- 74) *SAQ*, p. 203.
- 75) Qur’án 36:82, Muhsin Khán trans.
- 76) Qur’án 68:1, Pickthall trans.
- 77) See Milani and Fananapazir, “Pen Motif.”
- 78) P. Walker, *Wellsprings* 51.
- 79) *Ibid.*, p. 107.
- 80) For example, Qur’án 13:3, 36:35, 42:11, 43:12, 51:49, 53:45.
- 81) P. Walker, op. cit. p. 52.
- 82) *Ibid.* This equation is a reversal of tradition hylomorphism, but is a position in which he follows his predecessor, the Ismá‘ílí philosopher Abú ‘Abdalláh al-Nasafí (d. 942)—see Netton, *Alláh Transcendent*, p. 213. From Aristotle to the present, hylomorphism has been understood in terms of the constitution of all things of *passive* matter and *active* form. Hylomorphism was an integral feature of Islamic philosophy, where it was almost universally employed in the traditional, Aristotelian way. These early Ismá‘ílí authors are quite unusual in this sense. No other Islamic philosopher seems to have followed them in this respect, with one major exception: Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá‘í. Corbin makes a brief reference to this aspect of Shaykh Ahmad’s metaphysics (*History of Islamic Philosophy*, p. 355). The fact the Sijistání and al-Nasafí represent earlier proponents of this theory has not been noted by Shaykh Ahmad’s modern commentator, Idris Hamíd, to whose work we are indebted for much the material related to Shaykh Ahmad used here. Hamíd notes, regarding the Shaykh’s unorthodox position on this question: “Here Shaykh Ahmad makes a philosophical commitment that is, as far as I know, unique in the history of philosophy of Muslim civilization as well as neoplatonism in general. Reversing traditional hylomorphism, Shaykh Ahmad asserts that *matter* is the active principle while *form* is the receptive principle. Reverse hylomorphism is one of the fundamental principles underlying Shaykh Ahmad’s entire metaphysics and cosmology, which is, in large part, an application of this principle” (*Metaphysics*, p. 392n 38).

This reversal of the traditional position appears to be much more prominent in Shaykh Ahmad’s thought than in either of the two

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- Ismá'ílís, but this question requires further research. The Bábí and Bahá'í writings also maintain that matter is active while form is passive.
- 83) Hamíd, *Metaphysics* p. 297f.
- 84) Afán, "Tafsír" p. 126.
- 85) *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 245n 188.
- 86) 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Momen, "'Abdu'l-Bahá's Commentary" p. 27. I have modified the translation of this passage, in which Momen gives "Fashioner" for *qábil* and "Fashioned" for *maqbul*. This rendering can be misleading. The two terms come from the same root, meaning to receive, assent, comply, be willing or passive in relation to something. From the root verb, these two forms correspond respectively to something that does the action (*qábil* is the "doer" of receptivity, i.e. is the "receiver") and the thing to which the action is done (*maqbul* is the thing that is "received"). To illustrate, the verb root *kataba*, meaning "to write," follows the same pattern: *kátib* is a writer, one who writes, while *maktúb* means "written" or something that is written. It is doubtless somewhat confusing to talk about the action of passivity, but "fashioner" seems to convey the opposite of this, and the result is that the reverse hylomorphism—so explicit in this passage—is obscured.
- 87) *Ibid.*
- 88) *SAQ*, p. 89.
- 89) *Ibid.*, p. 239.
- 90) *Ibid.*, p. 292.
- 91) Qur'án 36:82.
- 92) 3:47.
- 93) There are variants to this *hadíth*. Hamíd quotes a version from the famous collection of Imámí traditions by Kulayni, the '*Usul min al-kafi*': "Nothing in the Earth or in the Firmament comes to be except with seven dispositions [*khisál*]: a willing [*mashiyyat*], a desiring [*irádih*], a determining [*qadar*], an accomplishing [*qadá*], permission [*idhn*], a record [*kitáb*], and a term of duration [*ajal*]" (*Metaphysics*, p. 394n 45). This is also quoted in an article by M. Jadhábání on these seven stages in the Báb's writings. As Jadhábání notes, the order of the last two is reversed in the writings of the Báb, so that *kitáb* is the last term ("Marátib," part one, p. 38).
- 94) *Logos*, p. 54.
- 95) First [of the stages of the Act (fi'l) in relation to Its effects (maf'úlát)] is the stage of Will (*mashiyyat*). It is the first remembrance (*dhikr al-awwal*) as [Imám] ar-Ridá to Ild Yúnus. By this is meant that a thing, prior to the stage of *mashiyyat*, is without mention (*dhikr*) in any of the stages of possibility. The beginning of its mention is that it be known in its existence (kawn). . . . Second is Purpose (*irádih*), and this is the determination of what has been willed. This is its second mention, known in its essence ('ayn)"
- (*Shaykh* Ahmad's *Fawá'id al-Hikmiyyah*, in Hamíd, *Metaphysics* p. 434; my translation from the Arabic).
- . . . Origination (*ibdá'*)—or Invention (*ikhtirá'*)—is the first creation of God. He created it through itself, then created the letters through the Origination, and made them actually from it. To any thing, He says: 'Be (kun)! And it is.' The letter káf alludes to Invention, that is, to the Will (*mashiyyat*), and this is the káf that circles around itself, for it is the source of existence (kawn). The *nún* refers to Origination, that is, to Purpose (*irádih*), and it is the source of essence ('ayn)"
- (*Ibid.*, p. 438, my trans.).
- 96) Afán, "Tafsír" p. 126.
- 97) *PM*, p. 27.
- 98) *TB*, p. 140.
- 99) In a Tablet partially cited in *Ishráq-Khávarí*, op. cit., vol. 1 p. 47f.
- 100) See Rafáti, "Lawh-i-Hikmat" passim.
- 101) The quaternary of Will, Purpose, Determination and Decree are set forth as the divisions of the Divine Activity in *Shaykh* Ahmad's *Fawá'id*, fourth *fá'ida*. See Hamíd, *Metaphysics*, pp. 434-442 for the Arabic, translated on pp. 293-303.
- 102) The Bayánic quaternities and related symbolism in Bahá'í and *Shaykhí* texts, though relevant to the exploration of the mythic dimension of the Bahá'í Faith, would unduly expand the proportions of the present work if treated fully here. I am currently working on a study of this issue, and God willing, the preliminary results of this study will be presented at the 'Irfán Colloquium in Michigan in 2002.
- 103) *TB*, p. 141.
- 104) Saiedi, *Logos* p. 189f., summarizing Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Bad'* (Prague: Zero Palm Press, 1992), pp. 121-123.
- 105) *TB*, p. 183.
- 106) *GWB*, p. 61.
- 107) *PM*, p. 90.
- 108) *SWA*, p. 54.

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* For reasons of space, this list is limited to works cited or referred to in the notes to the article presented here. For a full list of works consulted in the writing of the book—in which this article forms the third of five chapters—see *Cosmos and Chaos*, forthcoming.

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