

# **The Potent God and the Attracting God: Metaphysics and its Social Consequences**

Moojan Momen

## **Abstract**

This paper examines two conceptual frameworks that have been used in relation to God. The orthodox and normative view of God in the religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism is based on the concept of God derived by theologians such as St Thomas Aquinas from Aristotle's notion of the Unmoved Mover as the first cause of all subsequent chains of cause and effect. This then produces the image of God as the Creator of the world and the unseen force that controls and directs the events that happen in the world (the Potent God). This image of God as the Omnipotent King was very attractive to medieval rulers who could then point to the structure of the spiritual world (with an Omnipotent Ruler at its head) as justifying a similar social structure on earth with themselves as the symbol and image of the Divine ruler. There is however an alternative view of God that may be the view that Aristotle originally intended by his Unmoved Mover and which creates an entirely different view of God. This conceptual framework sees God as the cause of all that occurs but in the sense that God is the ultimate aim or goal of all events—that God is attracting all of Creation towards Him/It. Thus God acts on the universe not through a rigid cascade of cause and effect but rather through the attraction of love (the Attracting God). This view of God has a profound consequences not just in theology but also in our structure of thought and our social structure. It dissolves the ground from under questions that have caused many to turn away from God (for example, why an omnipotent God would allow the Holocaust to occur) and leads to social interactions that are more cooperative and collaborative rather than coercive and hierarchical. This paper examines the evidence that

this second view of God (the Attracting God) is given priority over the first view (the Potent God) in the Baha'i scriptures.

Religion in the West has derived its conceptual universe, its structure of Reality, from a certain view of God. This view was constructed by Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians and philosophers based on a variety of texts from the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Qur'an. However the philosophical foundations of this view go back to the concept of the "Prime Mover" or "Unmoved Mover" of Aristotle, which he developed in Book 12 of his *Metaphysics*.

There is, then, something which is always moved with an unceasing motion, which is motion in a circle; and this is plain not in theory only but in fact. Therefore the first heaven must be eternal. There is therefore also something which moves it. And since that which moves and is moved is intermediate, there is something which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance, and actuality.<sup>1</sup>

As developed in Western philosophy (especially St Thomas Aquinas), this concept of the Unmoved Mover or the Prime Mover became equivalent to the concept of God as the Prime Cause of every motion, every effect, every event that occurs in our world. The problem of how to reconcile Aristotle's idea that motion (causation) has existed for all time and the idea that the Prime Mover initiated motion was resolved by St Thomas Aquinas' assertion that God's creation of the universe occurs outside time; it does not imply that the universe had a beginning.

It is necessary, however, to examine Aristotle's concept of causation further. Aristotle defined four types of causation for everything that occurs. The material cause of a chair is the wood out of which it is made. The formal cause is the design or structure of the chair that existed in the mind of the carpenter before beginning to work on the creation of the chair. The efficient cause is that which acts on the wood in order to create the table: the carpenter, the saw and the plane. The final cause is the purpose for which the chair was built: for sitting upon and resting.

In Western philosophy, the concept of causation that has been applied to the Prime Mover has tended to be that of being the efficient cause of all that occurs in the world. In other words that God sets in motion all the change that occurs in the world and is thus ultimately responsible for everything that occurs through a cascade of cause and effect. This understanding of the Prime Mover and the consequent conceptualization of God can be named, insofar as it concern God in Himself/Itself, as the Potent God; and insofar as it concerns God's relationship to human beings as the Compelling/Coercive God. It is epitomized by calling God by names such as the Sovereign Lord and the Lord of the World and by attributes such as the All-Powerful and the Almighty. Perhaps the primary manifestation of this way of seeing God is the concept of God as the Creator. With the act of Creation, God set everything into motion. From that act of Creation, the sequences of cause and effect led down through time to the world that we have today and the events that occur in it. Most conceptualizations of God consider that He continues to intervene in the world causing new chains of cause and effect.

The Potent/Compelling/Coercive God has caused a number of theological problems for Western religions. These became most troublesome in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when most Western intellectuals turned away from religion. Events such as the Holocaust caused people to become more aware of a long-standing problem with such a conceptualization of God. If there is a God, who is all-powerful and loving and is the cause of all that occurs, how does it come about that He allows the Holocaust (injustice, the suffering of children, famines, etc) to occur?

### **An alternative way of viewing Aristotle: the Attracting God**

Although this conceptualization of the Compelling/Coercive God is the one that has predominated in Western thinking, it is not the only conceptualization that emerges from a study of Aristotle. Many who have studied Aristotle closely have come to the conclusion that when

Aristotle writes of the Prime Mover or Unmoved Mover as the cause of every occurrence that subsequently occurs, he is not in fact thinking of the Prime Mover as the efficient cause but rather as the final cause. In other words rather than compelling or pushing everything that occurs through cascades of cause and effect, events occur because they are drawn by attraction towards the Unmoved Mover as their goal. The Unmoved Mover is described in Book 12 of the *Metaphysics* as “the object of desire and the object of thought” thus:

And the object of desire and the object of thought move in this way; they move without being moved. The primary objects of desire and of thought are the same. For the apparent good is the object of appetite, and the real good is the primary object of rational wish.<sup>2</sup>

And so the Prime Mover or Unmoved Mover is not an efficient cause of all actions that occur but rather the goal towards which actions aim, towards which they are drawn by love. Aristotle wrote:

That a final cause may exist among unchangeable entities is shown by the distinction of its meanings. For the final cause is (a) some being for whose good an action is done, and (b) something at which the action aims; and of these the latter exists among unchangeable entities though the former does not. The final cause, then, produces motion as being loved, but all other things move by being moved.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, it is Aristotle himself who then takes this idea of the Prime Mover as acting through love and attraction and applies it to the concept of God. Immediately after the above passage, he goes on to say:

If, then, God is always in that good state in which we sometimes are, this compels our wonder; and if in a better this compels it yet more. And God is in a better state. And life also belongs to God; for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal. We say therefore

that God is a living being, eternal, most good, so that life and duration continuous and eternal belong to God; for this is God.<sup>4</sup>

Paul Humphrey summarizes this conceptualization of God thus:

The universe has no beginning in time, no temporal first cause, so Aristotle is obviously not seeking an efficient cause in the sense of “what set it all off?” Aristotle’s unmoved mover acts as final cause, as the good toward which all things strive. That is, it acts as objects of desire: “The object of desire and the object of thought move without being moved”.<sup>5</sup>

Roland Faber has expressed this thus:

What Aristotle means, here, is not any efficient cause that creates an effect by coercion, by pull and push, by external setting or influencing, but what he called a final cause. This means a cause that operates from the front, from the future, from the ideal; its power is persuasion, seduction, creating desire for fulfillment. This is an internal cause that awakens that which happens to its best possibilities, luring it to their realization and to become the best it can be at any moment and in any situation. God as Prime Mover is not at the beginning, not a ground of creation, not in the past as pusher, not a powerful tyrant who crushes, but the attractor, the aim, the goal of fulfillment and satisfaction.<sup>6</sup>

### **Evidence from the Baha’i scriptures: the Potent God**

It is clear that quotations can be found in the Baha’i scriptures that support both conceptual frameworks. We will first briefly review this evidence.

God is called by such names as “the Creator”, “the Sovereign Lord”, “the King”, and such attributes as being All-Powerful, Almighty and Omnipotent; they refer to God causing events that occur either in heaven

or on earth. See for example this quotation from the Kitab-i Aqas:

O kings of the earth! He Who is the sovereign Lord of all is come. The Kingdom is God's, the omnipotent Protector, the Self-Subsisting. Worship none but God, and, with radiant hearts, lift up your faces unto your Lord, the Lord of all names. Wash from your hearts all earthly defilements, and hasten to enter the Kingdom of your Lord, the Creator of earth and heaven, Who caused the world to tremble and all its peoples to wail, except them that have renounced all things and clung to that which the Hidden Tablet hath ordained.<sup>7</sup>

And:

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 thing...<sup>8</sup>

Similarly in the writings of the Bab:

In the Name of Thy Lord, the Creator, the Sovereign, the All-Sufficing, the Most Exalted, He Whose help is implored by all men. SAY: O my God! O Thou Who art the Maker of the heavens and of the earth, O Lord of the Kingdom!<sup>9</sup>

God as the Prime Mover and as the initiator of cascades of cause and effect are also implied in a number of passages such as the following from the Lawh-i Hikmat, the Tablet of Wisdom:

Such as communicate the generating influence and such as receive its impact 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.<sup>10</sup>

The ethos of obedience to the Divine law can be found in passages such as:

Whenever My laws appear like the sun in the heaven of Mine utterance, they must be faithfully obeyed by all, though My decree be such as to cause the heaven of every religion to be cleft asunder.<sup>11</sup>

### **Evidence from the Baha'i Scriptures: The Attracting God**

There is also much evidence in the Baha'i scripture for the view of God as operating primarily through love and attracting human beings towards Him/It rather than compelling them.

Love is the light that guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God with man, that assureth the progress of every illumined soul. Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the divers elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms. Love revealeth with unfailing and limitless power the mysteries latent in the universe. (Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 27)

If love did not exist, what of reality would remain? It is the fire of the love of God which renders man superior to the animal. (Abdu'l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 112)

In the Baha'i scriptures, the purpose of human life is stated to be draw nearer to God (reunion with God, attainment to the Presence of God, the Divine Seat, the Seat of Sanctity, etc.)—nearness to God can be said to be the Baha'i concept of salvation and can be seen to be a part of this concept of the Attracting God.

The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence. (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 70)

The Prophets and Messengers of God have been sent down for the sole purpose of guiding mankind to the straight Path of Truth.

The purpose underlying Their revelation hath been to educate all men, that they may, at the hour of death, ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High. (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 156)

Draw them nearer, O my God, unto the scene of Thine effulgent glory, and enrapture their hearts with the sweet savors of Thine inspiration... (Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 201)

Describing the [true] seeker, Baha'u'llah writes:

At every moment his love for his Lord increaseth and draweth him nearer unto his Creato... (Baha'u'llah, *Gems of Divine Mysteries*, p. 75)

From a prayer:

I beseech Thee, O my God, by Thy most sweet Voice and by Thy most exalted Word, to draw me ever nearer to the threshold of Thy door (Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations*, p. 288)

And:

O Son of Man! Sorrow not save that thou art far from Us. Rejoice not save that thou art drawing near and returning unto Us. (Baha'u'llah, *The Arabic Hidden Words*, no. 35)

Whenssoever the light of the revelation of the King of Oneness settleth upon the throne of the heart and soul, His radiance becometh visible in every limb and member. At that time, the mystery of the famed tradition gleameth out of the darkness: "A servant is drawn unto Me in prayers, until I answer him. And when I have answered him, I become the ear wherewith he heareth. ..." For thus the Master of the house hath appeared within His home, and all the pillars of the dwelling are ashine with His light. And as the action and effect

of the light are from the Light-Giver, so it is that all move through Him and arise by His Will. (*Seven Valleys*, new edition, pp. 31-2)

Not only is this drawing near to God the purpose of human life, it is the purpose of the Creation itself.

And when the sanctified souls rend asunder the veils of all earthly attachments and worldly conditions, and hasten to the stage of gazing on the beauty of the Divine Presence and are honoured by recognizing the Manifestation and are able to witness the splendour of God's Most Great Sign in their hearts, *then will the purpose of creation, which is the knowledge of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, become manifest.* (Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 175, italics added)

O Son of Bounty! Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things. Thus, ere thou didst issue from thy mother's womb, I destined for thee two founts of gleaming milk, eyes to watch over thee, and hearts to love thee. Out of My loving-kindness, 'neath the shade of My mercy I nurtured thee, and guarded thee by the essence of My grace and favor. *And My purpose in all this was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion and become worthy of My invisible bestowals.* And yet heedless thou didst remain, and when fully grown, thou didst neglect all My bounties and occupied thyself with thine idle imaginings, in such wise that thou didst become wholly forgetful, and, turning away from the portals of the Friend didst abide within the courts of My enemy. (Baha'u'llah, Persian Hidden Words, no. 29)

Attribute of God	Potent God	Loving God
Interaction with humans	Compelling God	Attracting God
	Kingly authoritarian God	Loving God
	running the world through cause and effect, reward and punishment, rules and systems	compassionate, merciful, loving Operates through educating and enabling
	Compels obedience through the fear of God	Invites alignment with the Will of God out of love
	Humans must obey the laws of God	Humans are invited to draw near to God

### The Priority of the Attracting God over the Potent God

So what is the relationship of these two seemingly opposing concepts of God: the Compelling God and the Attracting God? There are several indications in the Baha'i scripture that the concept of the Loving/Attracting God precedes or has priority over the concept of the Potent God.

'Abdu'l-Baha wrote a commentary on the Islamic Tradition "I was a Hidden Treasure and desired to be known therefore I created the Creation in order in order that I might be known." In this commentary, he states that in this Tradition, the Hidden Treasure refers to the unknown and unknowable Essence of God which is unchanging, the stage of Absolute Unity [*ahadiyya*]. Then he says that the first "stirrings of Lov... necessitated the Perfect Burnishing [*jala*] and Clarification [*istijla*]" resulting in the Essential Dispositions [*shu'unat dhatiyya*] which through the Divine Outpouring [*Fayd aqdas*], "manifested themselves out of the station of Essence into the station of Divine Knowledge [*hadrat-i`ilm*]. This is the first manifestation of the Absolute from

the Hidden Treasure in the Divine Knowledge. And from this manifestation the Eternal Archetypes [*a'yan thabita*] came into intellectual existence [*Wujud-i 'ilmi*]. And each one according to its inherent capacity, is distinguished from the others in the mirrors of the Divine Knowledge.”<sup>12</sup>

The *a'yan thabita* are the eternal archetypes of everything in existence and thus the sequence continues until it reaches the point that the Creation comes into being. We need not concern ourselves here with the intermediate stages but just note that the “stirrings of Love” precede the Creation in this sequence. Thus the attribute of the Attracting God precedes and thus is the cause of the attribute of the Potent God in the sequence. Thus the prime movement was that of love and the Creation is secondary and a product of that Love. This would indicate the concept of the loving/attracting God is primary and the compelling Creator God is secondary.

Baha'u'llah summarizes this idea succinctly in two of the Hidden Words:

O Son of Man! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, *I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee*, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.

O Son of Man! *I loved thy creation, hence I created thee.* (Baha'u'llah, Arabic Hidden Words, nos. 3 and 4; italics added)

In both of these passages, it is the movement of love that precedes and gives rise to the Creation.

### **A Word about Time and Language**

A cautionary note is needed at this point. The use of such words as “first stirring of Love”, “Love precedes Creation”, “stages leading to

Creation” all imply a sequence of events and thus the passing of time. The picture that emerges is of some event that occurred in the dim distant past whereby Creation came into being and everything else has flowed down over the course of time from this.

But “time” only comes into being with the Creation. Time is just a dimension of space, not an independent reality. This has been known in science since the early twentieth century when Albert Einstein demonstrated that Time cannot exist independent of the physical world. Thus the events that we are describing as occurring before the coming into being of the physical world occur outside of time. When we are talking about events that occur outside time, we are reaching the limits of human language and of the ability of human beings to conceptualize. Human minds are so structured to think in terms of events occurring in a sequence in time that it is almost impossible to conceptualize what it means to say that events occur outside of time. In fact everything in the spiritual world occurs outside time. 'Abdu'l-Baha refers to this in relation to the Covenant.

As for the reference in The Hidden Words regarding the Covenant entered into on Mount Paran, this signifieth that in the sight of God the past, the present and the future are all one and the same – whereas, relative to man, the past is gone and forgotten, the present is fleeting, and the future is within the realm of hope. And it is a basic principle of the Law of God that in every Prophetic Mission, He entereth into a Covenant with all believer...Covenant that endureth until the end of that Mission, until the promised day when the Personage stipulated at the outset of the Mission is made manifest. Consider Moses, He Who conversed with God. Verily, upon Mount Sinai, Moses entered into a Covenant regarding the Messiah, with all those souls who would live in the day of the Messiah. And those souls, although they appeared many centuries after Moses, were nevertheless – so far as the Covenant, *which is outside time, was concerned* – present there with Moses. The Jews, however, were heedless of this and remembered it not, and thus they suffered

a great and clear loss. (Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections*, p. 207)

The Romanian scholar Mircea Eliade has attempted to describe this by writing of sacred time as being an eternal now that exists in parallel with profane time.<sup>13</sup> These events such as the “first stirring of Love in the Hidden Treasure” did not happen in the distant past, they are outside time and therefore an ever-present now. So words that imply “priority” – such as that the movement of Love precedes the Creation – should not be taken to mean a priority in time, but a priority in the hierarchy of being or of becoming.

### **A Word about Loving God**

One aspect of the Loving God is that the flow of love must be mutual. It is the love of God that brought Creation into being but human beings are also enjoined to love God in return:

O Son of Being!

Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant. (Baha'u'llah, *The Arabic Hidden Words*, no. 5)

But it is also part of the Baha'i teachings that God is unknowable and any concepts that we form of God are our own imaginings.

All the people have formed a god in the world of thought, and that form of their own imagination they worshi.... All the sects and peoples worship their own thought; they create a god in their own minds and acknowledge him to be the creator of all things, when that form is a superstition. (Abdu'l-Baha, *Baha'i World Faith*, p. 381)

So the question arises how is it possible for a human being to love an entity about which they know nothing. One important aspect of this question concerns the relationship between Beauty and Love.

According to Plato, it is the recognition of Beauty that causes love to arise within the human heart. This recognition can be of physical and bodily beauty or it can relate to the beauty of a person's soul or mind. It can also relate to laws, institutions and to knowledge and science. How is it possible for love to arise through recognition of the Beauty of God when human beings cannot know anything about the Beauty or any other of the attributes of God. If they are loving God, then are they not loving a creation of their own imagination, which 'Abdu'l-Baha calls superstition.

A clue as to how this conundrum can be resolved can be found in the following quotation from Baha'u'llah regarding the Manifestations of God:

Thus, viewed from the standpoint of their oneness and sublime detachment, the attributes of Godhead, Divinity, Supreme Singleness, and Inmost Essence, have been, and are applicable to those Essences of Being, inasmuch as they all abide on the throne of Divine Revelation, and are established upon the seat of Divine Concealment. Through their appearance the Revelation of God is made manifest, and by their countenance the Beauty of God is revealed. (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 53)

And so since it is through these Manifestations of God that the Beauty of God can be seen.

### **A Word about Love, Beauty and Attraction**

Thus since it is through these Manifestations of God that the Beauty of God can be seen, it is through the recognition of beauty in these Manifestations (which the above quotation says is the Beauty of God) that love arises in the individual. This love that arises in the heart of the individual through the recognition of beauty in these Manifestations is love for God because Baha'u'llah asserts that belief in the oneness of God consists in regarding God and the Manifestations of God as one

and the same.

The essence of belief in Divine unity consisteth in regarding Him Who is the Manifestation of God and Him Who is the invisible, the inaccessible, the unknowable Essence as one and the same...This is the loftiest station to which a true believer in the unity of God can ever hope to attain. Blessed is the man that reacheth this station, and is of them that are steadfast in their belief. (Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 167)

As for the ultimate goal and purpose of human life which, as stated above, is to draw near to and to attain the presence of God, the Bab asserts that this is nothing other than drawing near to and attaining the presence of the Manifestation of God:

There is no paradise more wondrous for any soul than to be exposed to God's Manifestation in His Day, to hear His verses and believe in them, to attain His presence, which is naught but the presence of God, (The Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, p. 77)

Among the most common titles used to refer to Baha'u'llah are the Ancient Beauty and the Blessed Beauty. Thus the love that arises in the heart of the believer for Baha'u'llah is as a result of the recognition of His Beauty. And of course it is this love which then attracts the believer and draws him or her closer to Baha'u'llah.

In summary, since human beings can know nothing of the Essence of God, they cannot see Beauty there nor can love arise for the Essence of God. It is the Names and Attributes of God that causes this love to arise in human hearts. Although the Names and Attributes of God can be seen in all of God's Creation (and the Baha'i scriptures do call upon human beings to reflect upon the Divine as manifested in our own human natures and in the natural world<sup>14</sup>), nevertheless these Names and Attributes are seen most perfectly reflected in Baha'u'llah

and the other Manifestations of God. In other words, it is only through these Manifestations of God that human beings can see the Beauty of the Loving/Attracting God. The God to whom human hearts are attracted is Baha'u'llah and the other Manifestations of God.

### **Consequences of the Concept of the Potent/Compelling God**

Regardless of what Aristotle did or did not mean by his concept of the Unmoved Mover, the understanding of it as leading to the Potent/Compelling/Coercive God was developed by Jewish, Christian and Islamic theologians and philosophers into a conceptualization of God and of how God interacts with the world. Apart from the theological consequences of this that has been described above, this conceptualization of God then set up normative structures of thought which affected social realities.

The structure of thought that was produced by the Potent/Compelling God had consequences in many areas of thought. This became most marked in Western science, which came to consider the material and efficient causes as the only valid forms of causation, allowing rational and empirical explanations of the natural world. Any other form of causation became classed as mythological, magical or superstitious and relegated to being invalid as a source of knowledge. During the 20th Century, however, it became clear to scientists that this “Aristotelean” view of the natural world where every event occurs as a result of a cause is an insufficient view. The world of quantum physics is not governed by cause and effect and so a more expansive view is needed – one that is not driven by cause and effect but rather one where sequences of events occur that would not have been considered scientific in the old paradigm: chance and probability, emergent properties, particles that come into existence out of nothing, entities that are both particles and waves at the same time, Heisenberg’s Uncertainty principle, chaos theory, etc. While physicists are now comfortable with this new view of the natural world, and other areas of science such as chemistry and biology are starting to accommodate it, it has yet to permeate the

social sciences or indeed the thinking of those who advocate scientific atheism, the New Atheists.

The Potent/Compelling God also has major social consequences since it was thought that the earthly social structure would be most perfect when it most closely resembled the Divine structure of having a Potent God at the apex. This image of God as the Omnipotent King was very attractive to medieval rulers who could then point to the structure of the spiritual world (with an Omnipotent Ruler at its head) as justifying a similar social structure on earth with themselves as the symbol and image of the Divine ruler; it was a justification of their own absolute rule. It encouraged the idea that hierarchies of power were the natural order and became the justification for keeping the vast majority of human beings (women, racial groups, religious minorities, the lower classes and castes, etc.) suppressed and subjected to the norms of the ruling hierarchy. The normative views of this ruling elite became imposed on all. This social structure became viewed as the natural order, common sense, reality itself. And so to try to change the social structure or to question the authority of the rulers was, in a sense to go against this natural order, to go against reality (madness) and indeed to go against God (blasphemy and heresy). This social aspect of the conceptualization of God as the Potent/Compelling God is also now slowly breaking down. Those at the bottom of social pyramid of power are no longer willing to remain in that position, nor increasingly to allow their thoughts and opinions to be dictated to them by the social and political elite. Developments such as the Internet and social media have allowed them to bypass the controls that the elite had over access to knowledge and communication. The intellectual and social structures created by the conceptualization of God as primarily the Potent God) are crumbling (albeit slowly and with setbacks along the way).

However, according to the Baha'i scriptures, there are aspects of this worldview of the the Potent God that are correct. At the social level, the hierarchical structure of society is confirmed and justified by passages

that enjoin obedience to kings and rulers and liken the position of the king on earth to that of God in heaven:

This Wronged One pledgeth Himself, before the Divine Kaaba, that, apart from truthfulness and trustworthiness, this people will show forth nothing that can in any way conflict with the world-adorning views of His Majesty. Every nation must have a high regard for the position of its sovereign, must be submissive unto him, must carry out his behests, and hold fast his authority. The sovereigns of the earth have been and are the manifestations of the power, the grandeur and the majesty of God.<sup>15</sup>

'Abdu'l-Baha writes to the Baha'is in a similar vein:

O ye beloved of the Lord! It is incumbent upon you to be submissive to all monarchs that are just and show your fidelity to every righteous king. Serve ye the sovereigns of the world with utmost truthfulness and loyalty. Show obedience unto them and be their well-wishers. Without their leave and permission do not meddle with political affairs, for disloyalty to the just sovereign is disloyalty to God himself.<sup>16</sup>

And Shoghi Effendi also states:

...the considered judgement and authoritative decrees issued by their responsible rulers must... be thoroughly respected and loyally obeyed.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the Baha'i administrative framework also exhibits a hierarchy and obedience is also expected towards this. The following was written by Shoghi Effendi's secretary regarding the North American National Spiritual Assembly:

...the Guardian wishes me to again affirm his view that the authority of the National Spiritual Assembly is undivided and

unchallengeable in all matters pertaining to the administration of the Faith throughout the United States and Canada, and that, therefore, the obedience of individual Bahá'ís, delegates, groups, and Assemblies to that authority is imperative, and should be whole-hearted and unqualified.<sup>18</sup>

### **Consequences of the Concept of the Loving/Attracting God**

As described above, the Potent/Compelling God has had a great influence, not just on theology and religious philosophy, but on our very structures of thought leading to profound consequences in how human beings see the world (science), how they interact with others (sociology) and how they construct their communities (governance). So if the conceptualization of how God interacts with the world changes, this would also necessitate new ways of thinking about these intellectual and social matters. It would alter how human beings see reality itself – it would alter their reality.

Of course adopting the concept of the Loving/Attracting God alters our theology in important ways. Instead of conceptualizing God as the Divine King, a remote figure who sends down decrees that have to be obeyed or else punishment will ensue, God become a close figure, a Friend who assists and enables human beings to progress so that they can become ever closer to Him/It by becoming ever more like Him/It—by realizing the spiritual capacities within every individual, by acquiring the Divine Names and Attributes. This is summed up in one passage in the writings of Baha'u'llah, where the first two sentences describe the possibilities of the way a Potent/Compelling God would work, but this is then rejected in the next sentence in favour of the operation of the Loving/Attracting God:

He Who is the Day Spring of Truth is, no doubt, fully capable of rescuing from such remoteness wayward souls and of causing them to draw nigh unto His court and attain His Presence. “If God had pleased He had surely made all men one people.” His

purpose, however, is to enable the pure in spirit and the detached in heart to ascend, by virtue of their own innate powers, unto the shores of the Most Great Ocean, that thereby they who seek the Beauty of the All-Glorious may be distinguished and separated from the wayward and perverse. Thus hath it been ordained by the all-glorious and resplendent Pen...

(Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 70)

God is still the All-Powerful Potent/Compelling God but this power is now expressed not as a dominating “power over” but as an enabling “power to”. An interesting slant on this is the fact that the enactment and enforcement of religious law, which are one of the symbols of the Potent God, is turned by Baha'u'llah from being an expression of domination and power into an expression of love:

Observe My commandments, for the love of My beaut.... Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power.”

(Baha'u'llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, verses 4-5, p. 20-21)

At the social level, although Baha'u'llah does, as described in the quotations given above, enjoin obedience to kings and does appear therefore to give support to the existing hierarchical power structure, in fact however he then tempers this by stating that kings should exist merely as symbols of Divine Power, not as executors of earthly power:

Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof. If the sagacious combine the two forms into one, great will be their reward in the presence of God.

(Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 28)

The system of government which the British people have adopted in London appeareth to be good, for it is adorned with the light of

both kingship and of the consultation of the people.  
 (Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*)

Attribute of God	Potent God	Loving God
<b>Interaction with humans</b>	<b>Compelling God</b>	<b>Attracting God</b>
Social structure	Social hierarchy—king/president at the top	Egalitarian—group decision making
Social processes: Decision-making	decision coming from the top—to be obeyed	consultative decision making
Reason for following decisions	Punishment for disobedience	Following decision out of love
Social interactions	Competition, conflict, winner takes all	Cooperation, Consultation and collaboration; service
Basis of social interactions	Interactions are legalistic	Interactions based on equality and mutual respect

With this change of vision, in place of the remote kingly authoritarian God running the world mechanically through cause and effect, reward and punishment, rules and systems, one has a much closer more intimate relationship with a loving God, who is compassionate, merciful, and attracts us to Himself/Itself rather than compels obedience. Our goal in life is not so much to obey the laws of a King but to draw ever closer to a Divine Beloved. Obedience to the law of God thus becomes secondary and a consequence of the human being's love of God. The social structure that most closely parallels this change is one where the bonds of love are emphasized, where interactions with others are characterized by consultation, cooperation and collaboration

rather than creating situations where one person gives orders and the rest obey. The governance of communities is also implemented through consultative decision making, based on experience and learning, rather than on obedience to the laws and directives flowing down from the upper levels of a power hierarchy. The ethos that is created is not one of dictatorial authority and compelling obedience but rather that of a culture where all, those in the institutions of authority as well as the ordinary believers, are learning together, consulting together and working together on a journey to build better, more loving, more prosperous communities.

## **Conclusion**

This paper presents yet one more way in which the present activities of the world Baha'i community can be viewed. The path along which the Baha'i community is journeying can be conceptualized as the path from having one concept of God to having another. Whereas previously the Potent God, the Ruler, the Creator the Omnipotent was the central focus of the conceptualization of God, this is not cast aside but has become secondary and a consequence of the conceptualization of the Loving and Attracting God, the Friend, the Beloved, the celestial Beauty. God is not conceptualized as being in the past as the initiator of chains of cause and effect that affect us in our lives, but rather is in the future as the Good towards which we are attracted and are moving. One obeys the laws of God as a consequence of one's love for God. This leads to new ways of interacting between human beings: replacing power and hierarchy with love and mutuality in relationships. It leads to new models of governance not based on compulsion and fear but on consultation, cooperation and collaboration.

---

NOTES

- 1 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* (trans. W. D. Ross), Book 12, Part 7. (at <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>, accessed 31 March 2019)
- 2 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 12, Part 7.
- 3 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 12, Part 7.
- 4 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 12, Part 7.
- 5 Paul Humphrey, *Metaphysics of Mind: Hylomorphism and Eternality in Aristotle and Hegel*. (Stony Brook: State University of New York, 2007), p. 71
- 6 Roland Faber, “The Manifestation of God in the View of Process Theology”, *Lights of ‘Irfán*, vol. 20, 2019, pp. 7-54, esp. p. 15, I am grateful to Roland Faber for drawing this whole area of thought to my attention.
- 7 Baha’u’llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, vv. 78-79, p. 48.
- 8 Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, no. 27, p. 64.
- 9 The Bab, *Selections from the Writings of the Bab*, p. 212.
- 10 Baha’u’llah, *Tablets of Baha’u’llah*, p. 140.
- 11 Baha’u’llah, *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, v. 7, p. 21.
- 12 Moojan Momen, “‘Abdu’l-Baha’s Commentary on the Islamic Tradition: ‘I Was a Hidden Treasure . . .’ A Provisional Translation,” *Bulletin of Baha’i Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4 (Dec. 1985), pp. 4-64
- 13 See for example, Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheen and Ward, 1958), pp. 388-98.
- 14 Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings*, no.1, pp. 4-5; no. 153, pp. 326-7; Baha’u’llah, *Prayers and Meditations*, no. 176, p. 106
- 15 Baha’u’llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 89.
- 16 ‘Abdu’l-Baha, *Baha’i World Faith*, p. 446.
- 17 Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration*, p. 162.
- 18 *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, p. 105.