

Some Answered Questions, Intelligible Realities and Their Expression through Sensible Forms

'Abdu'l-Bahá

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Intelligible Realities and Their Expression through Sensible Forms

There is a point that is pivotal to grasping the essence of the other questions that we have discussed or will be discussing, namely, that human knowledge is of two kinds.

One is the knowledge acquired through the senses. That which the eye, the ear, or the senses of smell, taste, or touch can perceive is called "sensible". For example, the sun is sensible, as it can be seen. Likewise, sounds are sensible, as the ear can hear them; odours, as they can be inhaled and perceived by the sense of smell; foods, as the palate can perceive their sweetness, sourness, bitterness, or saltiness; heat and cold, as the sense of touch can perceive them. These are called sensible realities.

The other kind of human knowledge is that of intelligible things; that is, it consists of intelligible realities which have no outward form or place and which are not sensible. For example, the power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes: These are intelligible realities. Love, likewise, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. For the ear does not hear these realities, the eye does not see them, the smell does not sense them, the taste does not detect them, the touch does not perceive them. Even the ether, the forces of which are said in natural philosophy to be heat, light, electricity, and magnetism, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality.

But when you undertake to express these intelligible realities, you have no recourse but to cast them in the mould of the sensible, for outwardly there is nothing beyond the sensible. Thus, when you wish to express the reality of the spirit and its conditions and



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degrees, you are obliged to describe them in terms of sensible things, since outwardly there exists nothing but the sensible. For example, grief and happiness are intelligible things, but when you wish to express these spiritual conditions you say, “My heart became heavy”, or “My heart was uplifted”, although one’s heart is not literally made heavy or lifted up. Rather, it is a spiritual or intelligible condition, the expression of which requires the use of sensible terms. Another example is when you say, “So-and-so has greatly advanced”, although he has remained in the same place, or “So-and-so has a high position”, whereas, like everyone else, he continues to walk upon the earth. This elevation and advancement are spiritual conditions and intelligible realities, but to express them you must use sensible terms, since outwardly there is nothing beyond the sensible.

To cite another example, knowledge is figuratively described as light, and ignorance as darkness. But reflect: Is knowledge sensible light or ignorance sensible darkness? Certainly not. These are only intelligible conditions, but when you wish to express them outwardly you call knowledge light and ignorance darkness and say, “My heart was dark and it became illumined.” Now, the light of knowledge and the darkness of ignorance are intelligible realities, not sensible ones, but when we seek to express them outwardly, we are obliged to give them a sensible form.

Thus it is evident that the dove which descended upon Christ was not a physical dove but a spiritual condition expressed, for the sake of comprehension, by a sensible figure. For example, in the Old Testament it is said that God appeared as a pillar of fire. Now, that which is intended is not a sensible form but an intelligible reality that has been expressed in such a form.

Christ says, “The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father.” Now, was Christ within God or was God within Christ? No, by God! This is an intelligible condition which has been expressed in a sensible figure.

We come to the explanation of the words of Bahá’u’lláh when He says: “O King! I was but a man like others, asleep upon My couch, when lo, the breezes of the All-Glorious were wafted over Me, and taught Me the knowledge of all that hath been. This thing is not from Me, but from One Who is Almighty and All-Knowing.” This is the station of divine revelation. It is not a sensible, but an intelligible reality. It is sanctified from and transcendent above past, present, and future. It is a comparison and an analogy—a metaphor and not a literal truth. It is not the condition that is commonly understood by the human mind when it is said that someone was asleep and then awoke, but signifies a passage from one state to another. For example, sleeping is the state of repose, and wakefulness is the state of motion. Sleeping is the state of silence, and wakefulness is the state of utterance. Sleeping is the state of concealment, and wakefulness is that of manifestation.



For example, in Persian and Arabic it is said that the earth was asleep, spring came, and it awoke; or that the earth was dead, spring came, and it found life again. These expressions are comparisons, analogies, similes, and figurative interpretations in the realm of inner meaning.

Briefly, the Manifestations of God have ever been and will ever be luminous Realities, and no change or alteration ever takes place in Their essence. At most, before Their revelation They are still and silent, like one who is asleep, and after Their revelation They are eloquent and effulgent, like one who is awake.