

Spiritual Foundations for an Ecologically Sustainable Society*

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Abstract

This article takes a broad macroevolutionary approach to our changing relationship to Nature in the light of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. It suggests that humanity is in a process of evolving consciousness leading to the development of a new planetary culture based on spiritual principles. In an ecological sense, humanity has in many respects appeared to be a delinquent species running out of control. Within a larger vision of humanity's spiritual and social evolution, however, the present environmental crisis and the race's reaction to it can be seen as portending a momentous transformation. The process of evolving consciousness that can be discerned in emerging knowledge in physics, ecology, psychology, and other fields of science is leading to the possibility of a mature cooperative relationship between humanity and the ecosphere which gave it birth. After a brief overview of the current range of responses to environmental issues and the view of Nature on which they are based, this article will explore the basic attitudes to Nature contained within the Bahá'í writings. The second part of the article examines how the emergence of an ecologically sustainable social order is linked to basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith. Implicit throughout is the Bahá'í view of the balance and cohesion of material and spiritual realities.

Résumé

Cet article examine selon une approche macro-évolutive notre rapport changeant avec la nature, à la lumière des enseignements de la foi bahá'íe. Il suggère que l'humanité vit un processus de conscience évolutive conduisant à l'émergence d'une nouvelle culture planétaire fondée sur les principes spirituelles. Il suggère que l'humanité n'est peut-être pas, après tout, une espèce délinquante en perte de contrôle mais qu'elle est au centre même d'un vaste processus de croissance qui visiblement s'approche d'une transition formidable. En se basant autant sur les enseignements de la foi bahá'íe que sur les connaissances émergentes en physique, en écologie et en psychologie, ce processus présuppose le développement d'une relation mûre de coopération entre l'humanité et l'écosphère qui lui a donné naissance. Cet examen et sa synthèse seront accomplies en deux parties. Dans la première partie, l'auteur explore et explique les attitudes fondamentales envers la nature qui sont contenues dans les écrits bahá'ís. Dans la deuxième partie, il examine comment l'émergence d'une conscience écologique est reliée aux principes de base de la foi bahá'íe. La perspective bahá'íe implicite est celle de l'équilibre et de la cohésion entre les réalités matérielles et spirituelles. Tous les domaines de l'effort humain sont intimement reliés et tous nécessitent une compréhension profonde de qui nous sommes et pourquoi nous vivons ici maintenant. Cet article ne prétend pas représenter une position bahá'íe d'autorité et devrait être considéré comme une tentative préliminaire d'un esprit qui s'efforce de saisir les significations profondes latentes dans les écrits volumineux de la foi bahá'íe. Par cette tentative, l'auteur espère amener le lecteur à une meilleure compréhension des dilemmes environnementaux du jour et lui offrir une vision de transformation profonde dont on peut considérer la crise actuelle comme étant le «facteur déclenchant». Aussi idéaliste que cela puisse paraître, on considère qu'en ces jours seuls les visionnaires sont pragmatiques.

Resumen

Este artículo toma una perspectiva amplia y macro-evolucionaria de nuestra relación con la Naturaleza. Sugiere que la humanidad es, después de todo, no una especie delincuente fuera de control, sino que esta en el mero centro de un proceso inmenso de crecimiento claramente acercándose a una transición tremenda. Basándose en las enseñanzas de la Fe Bahá'í, además de conocimientos recientes en la física, ecología y, psicología, sugiere que la humanidad esta en un proceso de evolución de conciencia que llevara al nacimiento de una cultura planetaria nueva. Este proceso implica el desarrollo de una nueva relación cooperativa entre la humanidad y la ecosfera que la dió a luz. Esta examinación y síntesis será llevada a cabo en dos partes. En la primera parte se exploraran y se explicaran las actitudes básicas sobre la Naturaleza contenidas en las escrituras Bahá'ís. La segunda parte examinará como la

emergencia de una conciencia ecológica esta ligada a principios básicos de la Fe Bahá'í. Estos principios serán relacionados con preceptos para una sociedad ecológica siendo avanzados por los comentaristas sociales contemporáneos. En este ensayo, es implícito el punto de vista Bahá'í sobre el balance y cohesión entre la realidad material y espiritual al acercarse a cualquier cuestión, sea ésta la política ambiental, agricultura, desarrollo, salud o paz. Todas las áreas del esfuerzo humano están entrelazadas y todas requieren un profundo entendimiento de quienes somos y por qué estamos viviendo aquí ahora. Este ensayo no pretende ser una posición Bahá'í autoritativa; debería de ser considerado como un esfuerzo preliminar de una mente por entender algunos de los profundos significados latentes en las escrituras voluminosas de la Fe Bahá'í. A través de este esfuerzo, se espera que el lector/la lectora será llevado/a a un entendimiento más amplio de los dilemas ambientales actuales y será ofrecido/a una visión de cambio profundo que le permitirá ver la crisis actual como “funciones que obligan.” A pesar de lo idealizado que esto pueda aparecer, se puede ver que en estos días sólo lo visionario es pragmático.

Revisión Cultural de Actitudes hacia la Naturaleza

The dominant response to environmental issues over the past several decades has been mitigative. Environmental legislation, particularly in industrialized countries, has helped to ameliorate some of the worst forms of air and water pollution, while research has focused on developing better methods of monitoring environmental change. Environmental groups have focused largely on protecting endangered species and wilderness areas. They have also been effective in sounding the alarm on the ideology of consumerism and unbridled industrial growth.

While visible national and local issues have received significant attention, the more ominous cumulative effects of human activities on the planetary ecology as a whole have emerged to overshadow these efforts. Rapidly progressing environmental alterations—global warming, ozone depletion, soil degradation, forest depletion, and species extinction—threaten the delicate ecological balance of the ecosphere. As the twentieth century draws to a close, the threat of irreversible degradation of planetary life systems by these and other possible unanticipated dangers has come to replace nuclear war as the primary concern of collective security.

The predominant response to these issues has focused on the concept of sustainable development. For development to be sustainable, social and economic decisions need to recognize the finite biological and chemical limits of ecosystems and the ecosphere as a whole (Ruckelshaus, “Toward a Sustainable World” 167–68). However, continued economic growth is still considered necessary, particularly if nonindustrialized nations are to raise large segments of their population out of poverty. Sustainable development thus links environment and development issues and focuses on minimizing the environmental impact of production activities.

Attracting support from a broad spectrum of interests, sustainable development has signaled a shift from a corrective approach to an anticipatory or preventative approach to environmental policy. Nevertheless, while agreeing with sustainability as a value, many ecologists and social critics feel that sustainable development does not go nearly far enough in examining the cultural attitudes toward Nature that are at the root of environmental problems. They argue that technical and social adjustments to current models of development are inadequate to forestall deteriorating environmental conditions. What is needed is a “radically new metaphysic” that supports a more fundamental reconciliation between humanity and Nature (Livingston, “Ethics as Prosthetics” 67–81). Among the several schools of thought that exemplify this view are deep ecology, ecofeminism, and ecophilosophy.

Deep ecologists see the environmental crisis as stemming primarily from a faulty way of viewing humanity's relationship to Nature and insist that we need to “re-vision” that relationship. In *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered*, Devall and Sessions argue that the dominant worldview of modern industrial society is ecologically destructive because the earth is seen primarily as a “collection of natural resources” with no value other than being used for human exploitation (43). This utilitarian or resourcist view of Nature, they assert, is arrogantly anthropocentric and needs to be replaced by a “biocentric” view in which other forms of life are seen as having intrinsic value. What is needed, deep ecologists suggest, is the development of an “ecological consciousness”—an inward transformation that alters our perception of being separate from and above the rest of Nature.

In the search for common ground between the highest aims of civilization and the beauty, complexity, and mystery of Nature, deep ecology draws on a diversity of philosophical, cultural, and spiritual traditions as well as the science of ecology. It asserts that beyond our “narrowly materialistic scientific understanding of reality, the spiritual and the material aspects of reality fuse together” (Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology* 66). For Naess, who coined the term “deep ecology,” its essence is to ask deeper questions—“We ask which society, which education, which form of religion is beneficial for all life on the planet as a whole” (quoted in Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology* 74). Norms for deep ecological thinking include valuing Nature as having intrinsic worth; tolerance for diversity; decentralized, nonhierarchical, self-regulating social structures; small-scale, community-based technologies and economies; simplicity of wants; and appreciation for religious-spiritual dimensions (Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology* 18).

Ecofeminism, like deep ecology, rejects the anthropocentrism that elevates humanity above nonhuman Nature. Some ecofeminists argue that, to the extent that women are more naturally attuned to the interrelatedness of life, the development of an ecological sensibility in modern culture requires a reevaluation of women's experience and greater involvement of women in the production of knowledge (Kheel, "Ecofeminism and Deep Ecology" 63). Ecofeminism also shows how the domination of Nature and of women are linked patterns rooted in the patriarchal heritage of most cultures.

In ecophilosophy, as described by Henryk Skolimowski, ecological values and life-oriented human values come out of a vision of an evolving cosmos (*Eco-Philosophy* 54). In much the same tradition as Teilhard de Chardin, Skolimowski sees the spiritual or sacred becoming actualized in human consciousness as a fulfillment of evolution (Kealey, *Revisiting Environmental Ethics* 43). One expression of this is new values or moral imperatives in relation to the earth as the evolutionary matrix of life and consciousness. His position is one of "enlightened" anthropocentrism—all claims made for the protection of other forms of life are necessarily informed by human values of justice and compassion (Skolimowski, Commentary 284). In addition to being ecologically conscious, ecophilosophy is holistic and global, and it is concerned with wisdom, quality, and health. Instead of our current emphasis on objectivity and detachment, ecophilosophy sees human beings as spiritual agents in an evolving world endowed with grace and meaning and thereby emphasizes participatory commitment, compassion, and responsibility.

Perhaps the most eloquent presentation of a new ecological vision is in the writings of Thomas Berry (*Dream of the Earth*). Berry sees the present as a transition period to an "Ecological Age" in which the rediscovery of the subjective capacity to relate to the divine in all of creation will radically alter all aspects of human life.

Within this context of the search for new concepts and worldviews that support an ecological praxis, the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh have a significant contribution to make. In their emphasis on unity and evolutionary thinking, they offer a view of Nature that embraces both animistic wisdom and contemporary ecological understanding. At the same time, these teachings affirm divine transcendence and the essential unity of religious expression throughout history. Furthermore, Bahá'u'lláh presents a challenging interpretation of what religion is and its role in transforming the current world order. In addition, many of the tenets and principles for an alternative society based on ecological wisdom are expressed within the writings and institutions of the Faith that Bahá'u'lláh founded. This article will explore first the philosophical and then the social implications of the Bahá'í understanding of Nature and of human purpose in relation to it.

Relationship with Nature: A Bahá'í Perspective

In an examination of Bahá'í teachings as they apply to agriculture, Paul Hanley articulates a three-fold relationship between humanity and Nature involving principles of unity, detachment, and humility (Hanley, "Agriculture: A Fundamental Principle" 11–12). These same principles will be explored in depth below.

Unity with Nature: Wholeness and Cooperative Interrelationship of Creation

'Abdu'l-Bahá asserts that "all parts of the creational world are of one whole All the parts are subordinate and obedient to the whole. The contingent beings are the branches of the tree of life while the Messenger of God is the root of that tree" (*Baha'i World Faith* 364). A recognition of this essential unity is restated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in several passages:

... even as the human body ... is in reality a closely integrated, coherent entity, similarly the structure of the physical world is like unto a single being cooperation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being (*Huqúq'u'lláh* 20)

You are well aware, praised be the Lord, that both interaction and cooperation are evident and proven amongst all beings, whether large or small. In the case of large bodies interaction is as manifest as the sun, whilst in the case of small bodies, though interaction be unknown, yet the part is an indication of the whole. All these interactions therefore are connected with that all-embracing power which is their pivot, their center, their source and their motive power. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 345)

Association, harmony and union are the source of life.... Shouldst thou reflect on all created things, thou wilt observe that the existence of every being dependeth upon the association and combination of divers elements the disintegration of which will terminate the existence of that being. (*Bahá'í World* 2:50)

Liken the world of existence to the temple of man. All the limbs and organs of the human body assist one another; therefore life continues.... Likewise, among the parts of existence there is a wonderful connection and interchange of forces, which is the cause of the life of the world and tile continuation of these countless phenomena....

From this illustration one can see the base of life is this mutual aid and helpfulness.... (*Star of the West* 8.11:138)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the cooperative interrelations of creation as a manifestation of Love, which is “the secret of God’s holy Dispensation. (*Selections* 27). Through God’s love the world of being receives life:

Love is the cause of God’s revelation unto man, the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things.... 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. (*Selections* 27)

Further, the mineral, plant, and animal are seen to possess various grades and stations of spirit. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote in 1921:

...it is indubitable that minerals are endowed with a spirit and life according to the requirements of that stage....

In the vegetable world, too, there is the power of growth, and that power of growth is the spirit. In the animal world there is the sense of feeling, but in the human world there is an all-embracing power. ... the reasoning power of the mind

In like manner the mind proveth the existence of an unseen Reality that embraceth all beings, and that existeth and revealeth itself in all stages. (Reprinted in *Auguste Forel and the Bahá’í Faith* 9–10)

There is a cohesiveness within life’s ever-increasing differentiation—an underlying spirit that animates all of existence. The prevailing view of Nature as environment made up of material components of air, water, soil, and organisms is therefore inadequate. The very word *environment* implies that which is external and peripheral to what is assumed to be the central object of concern, human beings. This human self-preoccupation ignores the reality that life and spirit are properties of the whole and its reciprocal interactions.

Spiritual Detachment from Nature: A Requirement of Conscious Spirituality

Humanity too is part of the whole of creation that in turn reflects, in its harmony and unity, a divine and “unseen Reality.” At the same time, paradoxically, human beings occupy a unique station that can only be consciously realized through detachment from Nature. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that the human being “is in the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality ...” (*Some Answered Questions* 235).

Creation in the Baha’i view is a progression of increasingly complex orders from the mineral kingdom to vegetable and animal life, to human beings. Humanity, however, has the capability and the power of spiritual advancement, our very purpose being to advance towards God. As stated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

God has created all earthly things under a law of progression in material degrees, but He has created man and endowed him with powers of advancement toward spiritual and transcendental kingdoms. (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 302)

All other created things are “captives of nature and the sense world,” but human beings, created in the “image of God,” occupy a unique station in creation (*Promulgation* 302). We have evolved through all the physical kingdoms and contain all of their capacities plus our distinguishing capacity for rational and self-reflective thought. The development of this unique capacity of the mind, a capacity that allows us to mediate between the material and spiritual dimensions, has required us to separate ourselves from Nature, both externally and internally. Through this separation humanity has gained the capacity to comprehend Nature from the outside and to unravel its secrets. In an internal sense, too, by partially removing ourselves from the physical and instinctual responses that guide all other life forms, we have developed conscious faculties of judgment and volition.

The freedom these capacities give us involves a commensurate responsibility to recognize the “unseen Reality that embraceth all beings” (*Auguste Forel* 10). Our spiritual evolution depends on the degree of our attunement to that greater reality, which is described by Bahá’u’lláh and all the great prophets as limitless and eternal. Thus, to truly develop a conscious spirituality and to awaken to our full potential we are called to sever our immediate identification with the physical dimension of Nature. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá discusses this concept:

And among the teachings of His Holiness Bahá’u’lláh is man’s freedom, that through the ideal Power he should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world of nature... Until man is born again from the world of nature, that is to say, becomes detached from the world of nature, he is essentially an animal, and it is the teachings of God which converts [*sic*] this animal into a human soul. (*Bahá’í World Faith* 288–90)

The development of human consciousness remains limited if it is oriented only to material reality. Thus, numerous references are made in the Bahá’í writings, as in the scriptures of many other religions, to the necessity of separation from the influences of the world of matter. In this context Nature has often been referred to as a world of darkness. However, neither human beings nor Nature, in and of themselves, are evil. For example, when Bahá’u’lláh writes “esteem as nothing the world, nay, the entire creation,” he clarifies that “by ‘the world’ is meant your unawareness of Him Who is your Maker, and your absorption in aught else but Him” (*Bahá’í World Faith* 65, 134). The physical world is problematic only to the extent that it is seen as an end in itself. Thus, detachment from the physical world is a means of gaining conscious access to the spiritual realities that lie behind and beyond the physical. Paradoxically, this detachment allows us to see that the physical world perfectly and fully reflects the spiritual world. This is demonstrated, as John Hatcher has pointed out, in our growing awareness of ecology (*Purpose of Physical Reality* 69). As we begin to understand the ecological principle that everything is connected to everything else in the physical world, we are learning the truth of the essential spiritual law of unity that pervades and animates all of creation.

The paradox between our oneness with the rest of existence and our detachment from it can be seen on deeper reflection as representing the multidimensionality of our humanness. The recognition of our unity with the Earth, which in a very real sense gestated us, reflects both animistic wisdom and contemporary ecological understanding. At the same time, as was emphasized in earlier Revelations, we must reach beyond the material world to discover our spiritual potential and to fulfill our destiny as conscious beings. That potential and destiny, which has been reflected to us by a progression of divine Messengers, is an unfolding one in an ongoing process of creation. Ultimately, knowledge of the Divinity is impossible and unattainable. However, faith in and vision of our perfectibility gives us the means to progress towards fulfillment of all our potential and to participate in spiritualizing our social existence.

While the Bahá’í Faith is not the first belief system to recognize this tension between the material and spiritual dimensions, Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings bring a fuller appreciation of the balance in this relationship. Matthew Fox perhaps seeks just such a balance in his call for “pantheism” (*Original Blessing* 90). While, like pantheism, pantheism sees the spirit of God as present in all things, it insists that God is an independent Being above and beyond all things. Bahá’u’lláh writes on this point:

The whole universe reflecteth His glory, while He is Himself independent of, and transcendeth His creatures. This is the true meaning of Divine unity. He Who is the Eternal Truth is the one Power Who exerciseth undisputed sovereignty over the world of being, Whose image is reflected in the mirror of the entire creation. (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* 166)

Humility

In this delicate balance between unity and detachment, we are called on to honor creation, to recognize its sacredness, and to humble ourselves before it. In the miracle of life’s evolution, God has acted through Nature in an “emergent.” way. Creation is intrinsically endowed with meaning and purpose, and reflects the unity, beauty, and ultimate mystery of God. The Earth itself reveals the attributes of God, as Bahá’u’lláh affirms in several passages:

Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God. (*Gleanings* 184)

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light. (*Gleanings* 177)

How all-encompassing are the wonders of His boundless grace! Behold how they have pervaded the whole of creation. Such is their virtue that not a single atom in the entire universe can be found which doth not declare the evidences of His might, which doth not glorify His holy Name, or is not expressive of the effulgent light of His unity. So perfect and comprehensive is His creation that no mind nor heart, however keen or pure, can ever grasp the nature of the most insignificant of His creatures; much less fathom the mystery of Him Who is the Day Star of Truth, Who is the invisible and unknowable Essence. (*Gleanings* 62)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes creation as one of the “two Books” of God. “The Book of Creation is in accord with the written Book”—the sacred Revelations of all the prophets of God. Like the written book, “the Book of creation is the command of God and the repository of divine mysteries” (*Makátib* 436–37).¹

The spirituality of the world’s aboriginal cultures is based on understanding the primary “scripture” of the Book of Creation. In the revealed religions, symbols of Nature such as trees, water, and mountains also carry spiritual meaning. Both by direct contact and through symbolic reflection, the human soul is nourished by connection with the beauty, mystery, and grandeur of Nature. This connection is the basis of recreation as re-creation. (The love for Nature demonstrated by Bahá’u’lláh and Shoghi Effendi echoes this deep soul connection. See Appendix.)

An attitude of awe and gratitude towards the earth is part of attaining spiritual humility. Humility means literally of the ground or humus. Bahá’u’lláh describes this relationship:

Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 30)

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory. (*Epistle* 44)

A New Vision of Wholeness in Our Relationship to Nature

Developing new attitudes of respect for and cooperation with Nature requires, first of all, a vision of wholeness in our relationship to Nature. This requires a perspective of human evolution and human purpose that unifies material and spiritual realities. The focus on transcending Nature, which has characterized Western civilization in particular, is reflected in the current species’ self-centeredness of the human race. The divorce of human destiny from the reality of physical life on earth now requires a reconciliation. The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh warns, however, that this cannot be achieved through the replacement of our anthropocentrism by a biocentrism. Rather, our separation and detachment from Nature and our unity with it must be understood as a creative dialectic in the development of human consciousness.

The process of becoming conscious beings has required us to break away from our unconscious roots in Nature and to identify with a vision of our potential that transcends the physical. This separation has left us with no secure grounding for who we are and no clear vision of our wholeness. We retain only a dim memory of our unconscious wholeness with Nature (before we gained self-consciousness and broke the primal harmony of Eden) and a vague hope for the restoration of peace and wholeness in an abstract heaven or a future Kingdom of God. In this quandary, the negative self-concept we hold as fallen creatures itself breeds guilt, despair, and abasement of both ourselves and creation. However, Bahá’u’lláh makes it clear that we came into being in a perfect creation and that our station in creation is a noble one. We are the “fruit of creation,” conscious beings given the responsibility of fulfilling creation by reflecting its perfections. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addresses this dynamic as follows:

One of the things which has appeared in the world of existence, and which is one of the requirements of Nature, is human life. Considered from this point of view man is the branch; nature is the root. Then can the will and the intelligence, and the perfections which exist in the branch be absent in the root? (*Some Answered Questions* 4)

He further states that humanity “in the body of the world is like the brain and mind in man man is the greatest member of this world, and if the body was without this chief member, surely it would be imperfect. We consider

man as the greatest member because, among the creatures, he is the sum of all existing perfections” (*Some Answered Questions* 178). Bahá’u’lláh addresses the same theme:

To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. (*Gleanings* 177)

We are, in other words, Nature becoming conscious of itself; but the gift of consciousness lifts us into another dimension. Nature is perfect in itself because it is governed by laws and rules ordained by God. This perfection is reflected in all the metaphors of Nature used in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh and earlier prophets. The perfections of human beings, however, are unrealized. We must choose to realize them through the development of our latent spiritual potentials. Because the “attributes and names of God” are progressively reflected to us by a series of divine Messengers and their Revelations, our capacity to do so is always evolving. In the evolution of humanity towards conscious wholeness and completion, the Messenger of God is the key to the union of material and spiritual realities. Thus the center of existence is neither humanity nor Nature (neither anthropocentrism nor biocentrism). It is God through God’s Manifestation that is the “root” of the “tree of life” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í World Faith* 364). In this era, the unification manifested by Bahá’u’lláh has released the potential for us to transform ourselves towards a more complete reflection of the perfections of God and the wholeness of creation.

In this light, the deepening crises of planetary destruction are seen not as the inevitable failure of fallen humanity, but as a crucial stage in the evolution of human consciousness towards greater wholeness. The fear and pain created by these crises impel us to reflect profoundly on the incompleteness of our current vision and to respond with urgency to the forces of transformation. Let us, therefore, turn our attention to the social dimensions of this spiritual process of transformation.

Towards a Global Civilization: The Spiritual Evolution of an Ecologically Sustainable Society

Appreciating that creation is sacred and whole and understanding the role of human beings to be conscious, compassionate, and creative participants in the evolution of life are the fundamental conceptual requirements for achieving an ecologically sustainable society. Developing this society, however, requires not only a transformation in our individual attitudes and values but also a complete reformulation of our social structures. Most of the socioeconomic institutions of modern industrial societies are based on the pursuit of material progress through separation from and conquest of Nature. Nature is seen primarily as a storehouse of resources to be managed, harvested, and industrially processed for unmoderated human consumption. This resource appropriation has become the basis of economic growth, which, in turn, has become the dominant measure of social advance. The limits of this materialistic philosophy are now clearly demarcated in the accelerating destruction of planetary ecological systems. Yet our prevailing political, social, and economic institutions appear powerless to halt this destruction because they are implicitly based on the same values of separation from and conquest of Nature.

This separation denies a meaningful relatedness to the whole of creation and thereby denies sacredness to life. This loss of meaning and the ensuing emptiness in turn fuel the search for fulfillment through consumption, competition, and other addictive behaviors. The separation from Nature underlying modernism corresponds to a division between the human mind and heart.

Incorporating a new vision of wholeness in our relationship to the earth requires a reincorporation of the spiritual dimension that was lost with the dissolution of religious cosmologies in the modern era. We cannot return to these older cosmologies. Science, secular humanism, and the resulting profusion of modern institutions have brought society to a completely new level of advancement. This outer material advancement, however, has blinded us to the loss of the spiritual dimension of human life. We cling, says Skolimowski, to the ideals of “secular salvation” because its many successes seem too hard won to betray (*Eco-Philosophy* 71). Even so, the prevailing worldview of materialism is being undermined both by the proliferation of its problems and contradictions and by the emergence of more inclusive cosmologies that provide new organizing principles. The unity of the material and spiritual dimensions of existence is just such a principle; it provides a foundation for a vision of humanity in relation to the whole of creation. Discoveries on the new frontiers of science point to this kind of integration and provide analogies, for example, in physics in which light is understood as both a wave and a particle. The emerging worldview must similarly account for human beings as both biological and spiritual beings. Skolimowski asserts that humans “are the custodians of the whole of evolution, and at the same time, only the point on the arrow of evolution ... the sacredness of man is the uniqueness of his biological constitution which is endowed with such refined potentials that it can attain spirituality” (*Eco-Philosophy* 74–75).

The religion created by Bahá'u'lláh incorporates just such an integrated evolutionary perspective. As discussed earlier, it views our spiritual origin and destiny as part of the whole evolution of life on the planet. Spirit is expressed in all stages and processes of existence and is realized consciously through the distinctive capacities of human awareness. The development of civilization itself is seen as a progressive organic process of maturation in which all the great religious revelations and scientific advancements are integral components. This dynamic and holistic perspective can help us to pierce the socially constructed dichotomy of humanity versus planet and, at the same time, to overcome the destructive divisions of the human race. In this larger evolutionary movement, our current situation can be understood as a crucial stage in the birth of a new world order appropriate to humanity's spiritual and intellectual maturity. The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh not only delineate the past and future dimensions of this process but also offer values, principles, and new institutional forms that can guide us through this transition to maturity and the development of a global civilization. These values and principles will now be related to the requirements for an ecologically sustainable society.

Evolutionary Perspective

In the Bahá'í writings, the evolutionary development of the human species is viewed as a purposeful organic process. Natural images, such as the Earth developing in "the matrix of the universe" and the human species growing and developing in the "womb of the earth" are used by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to describe the nature of this process (*Some Answered Questions* 182–83). The evolution of civilization is also viewed organically using the analogy of human developmental stages.²

Within this general framework of maturation, it is possible to sketch out humanity's changing relationship with the Earth. In the earliest phases of the human journey, human dependence on the Earth was embodied in myths and cultural forms. Symbols of the life-giving Earth as "mother" signified the bonding typical of childhood. This is illustrated by statements attributed to Chief Luther Standing Bear on the Lakota tribe's beliefs about Nature:

The Lakota was a true naturalist—a lover of Nature. He loved the earth and all things of the earth Kinship with all creatures of the earth, sky, and water, was a real and active principle.... Wherever the Lakota went, he was with Mother Earth. No matter where he roamed by day or slept by night, he was safe with her. This thought comforted and sustained the Lakota and he was eternally filled with gratitude. (Quoted in Hali, *Spirit of the Earth* 49)

The degree of control over natural events was limited, and natural forces were understood in terms of magical or mythological powers. Ceremonies symbolized and celebrated human relationships with the elements of creation and the Creator. A sense of cyclical order predominated. This sense was often closely associated with an appreciation of the power and mystery of the "feminine" and the role of women as the guardians of the forces of generation and nurturance of life.

In the emergence of the great axial civilizations of recorded history, there was increasing emphasis on the rational mode of consciousness. In these civilizations, the drive was towards greater independence, order, and abstraction representing the primacy of "masculine" energies. Human transcendence was also emphasized in the successive monotheistic revelations of the axial civilizations. In the process, Nature was gradually demythologized, earlier animistic and pantheistic views were abandoned, and spiritual and intellectual pursuits were abstracted from the world of Nature and its instinctive primal energies. Nature began to be subsumed as a resource for the development of larger collective units of social organization. Trade, commerce, and artistic as well as intellectual pursuits were associated with urban dwelling and thus with an increased physical separation from Nature.

Western science developed in this context and took as its basic operating assumption the radical separation of subject and object, humanity and Nature. The Earth ceased to be a community to which humanity belonged and was seen instead as a commodity for use and possession.

The expansion of the power of human knowing through science has allowed us to reduce the material world into its component parts, devoid of mystery and the power to affect us. Our original dependence on the natural world has been replaced by alienation from Nature and by power over a meaningless material world.³ As destructive as this alienation has been in terms of the domination of Nature, this mind-set can be understood in the larger evolutionary context as a necessary phase of humanity's maturing consciousness. Just as in adolescence, when individuation requires the fragile ego to emerge and assert itself against the regressive urge to be drawn back into the unconsciousness and dependence of childhood, so too the human race has had to break away from the primordial unity of our original unconscious wholeness with Nature.

Science can be viewed as humanity's collective ego asserting human will, creativity, and independence, breaking the limitations and superstitions that bound us in previous ages, and penetrating and commanding the world

of Nature that previously encompassed us. However, to continue to assert the extreme degree of independence and “false sense of omnipotence” given us by our mastery of Nature now threatens to destroy all life (Hatcher, “Science of Religion” 16). Our evolutionary imperative is to leave this adolescent phase and progress to a more mature understanding of our true relationship with Nature—to the conscious interdependence that will be the hallmark of our adulthood.

The full extent of this interdependence (felt and recognized by many tribal societies) is now coming to light in many areas of inquiry, as the emergent paradigms in ecology, quantum physics, neurophysiology, and psychology demonstrate. Even if we no longer see the planet as sacred, advancing knowledge compels us to see that the ecological systems of the Earth are all interconnected, and human life is inextricably woven within the wholeness of the ecosphere. Life is a property of the ecosphere as a whole—an evolving, self-regulating system that can be understood as a living organism in which physical and biological components have evolved together over billions of years to maintain the delicate balance of temperature and other parameters necessary to maintain life (Lovelock, *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*). Rowe suggests that the living ecosphere or “Gaia” be thought of as a supra-organism to indicate its “higher level of organization” within which humans are a conscious but dependent participant (*Home Place* 244). Quantum physics has demonstrated how the same principle of interconnectedness applies in the subatomic world where elementary particles cannot be observed except in their relationship with everything else including the observer. The Newtonian view of a clockwork-like world in which separate objects interact in mechanical fashion is giving way to a view of the world as a complex web of relationships that can only be properly understood in its wholeness (Capra, *Turning Point*). These insights echo the conception of the world articulated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá more than seventy-five years ago that “the structure of the physical world is like unto a single being” in which “all created things are closely related” and “inseparably linked” (*Huqúq’u’lláh* 20).

The human mind is also part of this interconnectedness. The quantum phenomenon of nonlocality shows that the connection between supposedly separate subatomic particles is instantaneous. In effect, they behave as a single entity, part of an unbroken whole. Thus, we are led to consider that “if our brains are made up of the same subatomic particles as the rest of the universe, then they’re totally interconnected with the rest of the universe” at this very deep structural level (Ray, “Changing Our Minds” 14).

Furthermore, all systems, from the subatomic to the planetary, exhibit inherent capacities for self-organization and self-renewal—in other words, for maintaining and restoring wholeness. Awakening to the fundamental wholeness of which we are a part can provide a rational foundation for becoming sensitive and conscious participants in planetary healing and maintenance. By placing humanity inextricably within the web of life’s continuous creation, the holistic worldview allows human beings to realize both their powerful mastery and their child-like dependence with respect to the natural world. Instead of freezing humanity’s quest for purpose and meaning into a position of hubris; human beings can be freed to appreciate the wealth, meaning, and responsibility that the evolution of life has given them.

The journey through duality—the development of the capacity for rational discrimination and the formulation of a separate identity—has been an inescapable feature of our maturation as conscious beings. Most assuredly the price that has been paid in terms of loss of meaning, fragmentation, and conflict has been a heavy one. But the intuition that there is unity and cohesion at the heart of life has remained within us.

The fact that science is now validating the dynamic interconnectedness of life does not by itself restore a subjective relatedness or sense of wholeness. Restoration of that sense of wholeness on a conscious level is a process related to the root meaning of *religion*—to reconnect or bind back. Throughout history, religion held up transcendent images of the sacred that have described the potential for human self-completion and for creating a social order based on spiritual principles (Polak, *Image of the Future*). The highest and noblest aspirations of the human spirit have been drawn out in response to these visions. When positive and transformative images of the future have been lost, individuals and cultures have atrophied. That these sacred images of the future have often become dormant or misdirected owes less to the failure of religion than to a misunderstanding of religion itself as an evolving force. In the Bahá’í view, the physical evolution of the cosmos and of all life on earth, the social and intellectual development of civilization, and the spiritual maturation of each human being are emergent processes expressive of one universal creative force. Within this emergent context, the truths revealed through religious revelation, like the truths discovered through science, are relative and progressive. Throughout the ages, the teachings of a succession of spiritual luminaries have guided humanity’s spiritual and social development, and animated the evolution of human consciousness towards greater awareness and responsibility. While earlier Revelations provided the spiritual impetus for higher levels of social cohesion in accordance with the capacities of the time, the ultimate vision of a peaceful and unified society remained a prophetic image.

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation renews this vision, amplifies its meaning, and prescribes specific principles and processes for its eventual realization. The formalization through scientific inquiry of an emerging general insight about the comprehensive unity of the universe and of the complex potential of human consciousness within that

unity resonates with the vision Bahá'u'lláh reveals (Bopp, "Transformation and Human Development" 7; Berry, *Dream* 46). It is within the context of this emergent unity paradigm—supported by a complementarity of religious and scientific perspectives—that current ecological and social issues need to be viewed. From a developmental perspective conscious unification on a planetary scale is the process appropriate to humanity's maturity and growing technological capacity. Planetary unity is the necessary and inevitable fruition of humanity's collective spiritual and material development—"the consummation of human evolution" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 43).

The Unity Paradigm: Precondition for an Ecologically Sustainable Society

Unity is the pivotal principle of the current stage of humanity's maturation. The primary expression of this principle is the recognition and acceptance of the oneness of the human family. The oneness of humanity as enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh is not simply "an expression of vague and pious hope" or a renewal of traditional calls for solidarity. "It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 43). It calls for a reflection in the world of humanity of the fundamental oneness in the whole of creation and requires a new understanding of the relationship of parts to each other and to the whole. This higher degree of integration is part of humanity's maturing consciousness following upon its entire developmental process and its increasing levels of interaction and interdependence.

This coming of age requires not just a perceptual shift; it requires institutional arrangements that acknowledge the primacy of the whole. Foremost among these is some form of world federal system guided by universally agreed-upon values and laws that can reflect the reality of humanity's oneness and its integral dependence on the encompassing ecosphere, which is itself a unified whole (Bahá'í International Community, "Earth Charter"). Systems of thought and governance appropriate to humanity's adolescence must give way to new patterns and new institutions necessary to manage cooperatively an increasingly interdependent world. The international systems of commerce, trade, and communication must be reshaped within a cooperative framework oriented to justice, wherein the advantage of the part is best served by the advantage of the whole.

Candid admission of the consequences of disunity and the necessity of unity is a crucial stage of this transition. The costs of nationalism, racism, and other forms of disunity can be tallied in the social and ecological effects of war, inequality, and grossly irresponsible military expenditure. Global military spending continues to run in excess of \$700 billion (D .S.) annually—a decline of 18 percent in constant dollars since its peak in 1987 before the end of the Cold War (Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures* 11). It is estimated that less than 15 percent of this amount (\$105 billion annually) would fund the most urgent global environmental requirements—halting desertification and soil erosion, protecting and replanting forests, protecting the ozone layer, moderating global warming, cleaning up hazardous wastes, developing renewable sources of energy, and implementing population stabilizing measures (Brown, *State of the World*; Gable and Frisch, *Doing the Right Things* 20).

Not only has disunity manifested itself in a tragic misallocation of resources to militarism but also have the degradation of ecological systems, itself often a result of war, and the resulting resource shortages been a further cause of war. Moreover, the inequitable distribution of wealth and human rights has resulted in untold human suffering and has added to the stress on fragile ecosystems. This is apparent in Africa where food export-dependent countries facing trade barriers and low commodity prices overuse their fragile soils to feed burgeoning populations and pay mounting foreign debts (World Commission, *Our Common Future*).

War and the pursuit of power are direct examples of disunity between classes, races, religions, and nations. At the same time, the tension of many other inequities in social and economic relationships has been deflected by our disunity with and pursuit of power over Nature. As growing technological might, often developed from military research, has been applied to exploiting the Earth's resources, the promise of unending economic growth has been used to divert attention from the inequality of prevailing social orders. (In the process, irresponsible consumption and ever-expanding expectations of material benefits have been fostered. As the world's major industrial nations have pursued this path, they have come to consume as much as 80 percent of the world's resources for 20 percent of the world's population.)

Current global issues—especially ecological concerns that transcend national boundaries—are, in effect, "forcing functions" requiring the community of nations to move beyond ad hoc and fragmented approaches to solving problems. The call for an integrated global ethic and policy of sustainable development raised in *Our Common Future* and further amplified through the Earth Summit process represents a tacit acceptance of the need for unity in solving global problems. With this acceptance, there is a growing search for ways to bring about the changes in attitude and motivation required for unified global action. The creation of a Sustainable Development Commission by the United Nations, as part of the implementation of the Earth Summit's "Agenda 21," is one small but significant step in the recognition of the need for global goals and principles that anticipate and guide future development.

While all such steps are important, political and social reorganization can only become effective to the degree that the consciousness of the oneness of humanity is the operating premise. Only this spiritual and organic truth, once accepted, will release the constructive energy and will needed to make the far-reaching structural changes required for fostering sustainable patterns of development. With an understanding of the implications of the unity paradigm in human affairs, the principle of unity becomes the foundation for building and mandating institutions that can responsibly address environment and development issues on a global scale. It is for this reason that a major emphasis of the Bahá'í International Community is to develop a consultative and institutional framework that demonstrates the viability of operating as a unified global community.

Globalism and Decentralism

The call by deep ecologists and other social theorists for decentralized, smallscale, community-based technologies and economies, at first glance, seems to represent movement in a direction opposite to the globalism discussed above. Ecological consciousness, it is reasoned, has mostly developed within a “minority tradition” that includes tribal cultures, utopian communities, and many religious traditions such as within the Benedictine Order, Taoism, and Buddhism (Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology* 18). It is on a small scale that individual responsibility can be upheld within a participatory community democracy and that technology can be humanized and made more environmentally appropriate. These ideas are developed much further by Roszak (*Person/Planet*) and Schumacher (*Small is Beautiful*). There is concern that a global order would become just a more effective superstate for the conquest of the Earth. What is needed, it is suggested, is to develop communities on an ecosystem-specific basis (bioregionalism) with people committed to “reinhabiting” and restoring that ecosystem and developing a renewed sense of place.

Some important human and ecological values are implicit in these ideas. Ecological systems are living systems to which patterns of production and habitation should adapt, rather than continuing our current approach of making land and people adapt to the technology. In agriculture, the latter approach has resulted in the imposition of single-purpose, monocultural cropping systems, regardless of the biophysical and cultural contexts.

There are several aspects of the Bahá'í approach that relate to these decentralist concepts. First and foremost, the realization of an organic unity on a global scale is based on a fundamental respect for the value of traditional cultures and on the importance of local community consultation within an organically molded global framework. The Bahá'í concept of globalism “repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity ...” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 42).

Already the structure of the nascent Bahá'í International Community offers helpful guidelines for achieving a worldwide society whose vision is world embracing but whose members and activities are exceedingly diverse. It comprises over 120,000 local communities in some 235 countries and dependent territories under the guidance of a single globally elected body, the Universal House of Justice. While following uniform guidelines for spiritual and social development, each community is expected to adapt its programs to the exigencies of its cultural and ecological context. This adaptation is fostered through local, elected, consultative institutions, which focus on developing community resources and can draw as well on the national and international resources of the larger community. Each community perceives itself as an element of a “global organism,” which itself is a prototype for a future world community. Within that community Bahá'ís are encouraged to disperse and decentralize.

The Bahá'í concept of the relationship between global integration and local adaptation and differentiation is not unlike the relationship between the ecosphere and its component ecosystems (Dahl, *Unless and Until* 81–82). Ecosystems vary greatly according to their locale, but all operate by similar ecological principles and are organically interwoven in the larger encompassing ecosphere. The Bahá'í model of an organically structured social order also illustrates how, in general, spiritual and natural principles are correlative.

Aside from the structural arrangements for coordinating global and local concerns, there are several principles outlined in the Bahá'í writings that suggest a land- and community-based orientation. Agriculture is described as a “fundamental principle” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 90) and “village reconstruction” (Hanley, “Agriculture” 8) as the initial stage of economic development. “[S]tatements...to the effect that agriculture with its associated activities will reassert itself as the first industry of society” support the idea that, in future, society will be more decentralized and “harmonized with nature” (Huddleston, *Earth Is But One Country* 131). Blueprints for the establishment of central community institutions to facilitate community self-reliance and development are also outlined in the Bahá'í writings. A key principle is that development should support and benefit whole communities rather than allow individuals or élites to monopolize wealth. Thus the Bahá'í view of a global society is one based on individual, family, and local self-reliance, integrated with sophisticated interdependence on the national and global levels.

Science and Religion: A Necessary Unity

The idea that both religious revelation and scientific investigation are progressive forces in the process of maturation has been introduced above. However, the continuing separation between these two great areas of endeavor keeps humanity from pursuing a truly integrated approach to solving the ecological crisis. The division between science and religion that began in the Age of Enlightenment has resulted not only in separate religious and secular worlds and institutions but also in a vast gulf and antipathy between faith and reason, vision and technique, the longings of our hearts and the logic of our minds. The success of science in making Nature the object of analysis and of resource appropriation has forced the means for divine communion into a retreat to a peculiarly subjective realm separate from physical existence. No wonder then that the Earth has become, in the minds of many, a shoddy way-station en route to salvation in a nonphysical world.

Bahá'u'lláh unifying vision of the roles of science and religious revelation in serving an ever-advancing civilization transcends this dichotomy. Science is an indispensable expression of human intelligence and will, and is appreciated as a systematic investigative approach to developing knowledge. The reality that is investigated by science, through experimentation and reasoning, and that is illuminated through the progressively revealed truth of religion is ultimately one. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "being one, truth cannot be divided..." (*Paris Talks* 129). There is only one reality. Since the "two Books"—Creation and Revelation—are totally complementary, the forces propelling us to a consciousness of their unity are invested in the very structure of reality. In other words, the Word of God can be understood as the creative energy animating the world of matter and propelling the dynamics of evolving consciousness. The "realities of all created things are inebriated" and the "atoms of the earth have been illuminated," writes Bahá'u'lláh of the transformational energy released by his Revelation (*Gleanings* 324).

The instrumentality of science is now confirming the unity of life, in which creation is seen as a dynamic configuration of one energy with the ability to "organize itself in ever more [complex and] subtle forms and configurations" (Hatcher, "Science" 21). This knowledge may itself help release and confirm deeper intuitions within us of the essential humanity–Nature bond that have been repressed in our cultural development. However, Bahá'ís believe this knowing can only be understood and celebrated within the birth of a mature religious consciousness. As William Hatcher points out, humanity awoke to its self-awareness, and through that we know the force of growth acting through creation is capable of subjectivity and intelligence because we are configurations of energy possessing those qualities ("Science" 22). The facts remain, however, that we did not create ourselves and that there is an ultimate mystery and question of meaning behind life. The role of religion is to render accessible to the individual the "experience of self-transcendence and mystic communion" with this mystery—to connect us to our source and unfold each individual's purpose within the vast collective enterprise of evolving consciousness ("Science" 24). In our willingness to trust and respond to the forces of growth and transformation, we become part of an organic process that is encompassing and organizing the collective life of humanity, yet is centered in each human heart. In this sense, religion is the "science of the love of God" (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven valleys and the Four Valleys* 52).

The unity between science and religion is expressed in a metaphor employed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar. ... Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. (*Paris Talks* 143)

It is through the balanced combination and cooperation of science and religion that humanity can be allowed to acquire a genuine humility and respect for Nature while applying the appropriate skills and technologies needed to advance civilization. In terms of both our spiritual growth and our common dependence on the ecosphere, we are called to be, fully and consciously, citizens of one Earth home. Our total dependence on the encompassing ecosphere reflects and reinforces our dependence on God. Paradoxically, our detachment gives us the spiritual capacity to participate consciously in this role without being caught in a purely material existence.

Male and Female: Equality and Balance

Inevitably, given the history of civilization, the prevailing social order is seen as the symbolic expression of the male ego and its tendencies towards rationality and competitiveness. Qualities of nurturance, intuition, and emotional sensitivity, which are associated in popular thought with the feminine principle, however, are the qualities most needed to heal our relationship to Nature. It is not surprising that the expansion of environmental awareness and the movement for women's equality have been parallel developments. Drawing on the idea that ecology is literally the study of the Earth "household," Merchant suggests that our growing understanding of Earth as home is linked with

women's consciousness of the home as a habitat to be honored and cherished (quoted in Devall and Sessions, *Deep Ecology* 229).

Beyond the recognition of the feminine principle as an aspect of restoring ecological sensibility in both men and women, it is also crucial that women be welcomed as full partners in all fields of human endeavor. Bailiffs believe that, as the participation of women is encouraged and valued, "the moral and psychological climate" for the advancement of peace and environmental sustainability can be fostered (Universal House of Justice, *Promise of World Peace* 27).

For Bahá'ís, the equality of women is seen as an essential objective and a precondition for the establishment of a just and peaceful world. While a full discussion of this important principle lies beyond the scope of this article, the Baha'i writings emphasize that as long as women are prevented from reaching their full potential, society is unbalanced. In 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá advanced the following proposition on this important theme:

...man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities both of body and mind. But the scales are already shifting—force is losing its weight and mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service, in which woman is strong, are gaining ascendancy. Hence the new age will be an age less masculine, and more permeated with the feminine ideals.... (*Star of the West* 3.3:4)

The Emergence of a New World Order

The overarching vision for the changes in values, institutions, and social forms that are part of developing an ecologically sustainable society is the emergence of a new system of world order based on universally accepted spiritual principles. Over a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh envisioned such a fundamentally new world order and outlined institutional forms that it would require. These include a world legislature, a world tribunal, and a collective mechanism for safeguarding all member states from the threat of war. These institutions are seen as more than just new structural arrangements for international cooperation on political, economic, and environmental issues—they represent a primary expression of the unity paradigm enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh as the hallmark of humanity's maturation. They will be effective to the degree that they both reflect and foster a consciousness of the oneness of humanity.

It is now becoming apparent in world affairs that collective order at the planetary level is necessary for not only effectively tackling environmental problems but also redressing the disparities that have relegated masses of humanity to poverty, despair, and tragic displacement caused by war and environmental degradation. The establishment of norms of unity, mutuality, and cooperation for the human family as a whole is necessary to create the climate both for sharing material well-being and also for fostering the development of the full potential of each individual. As Bahá'u'lláh's teachings clearly indicate, those structures that favor unity and cooperation create the most favorable milieu for spiritual growth, and providing such a milieu is an essential purpose of society (Hatcher, "Concept of Spirituality" 26–27). By contrast, materialistic value systems and social structures based on competition, power, and dominance are antithetical to spiritual growth and have resulted in the exploitation of both Nature and other human beings.

What is being suggested here is an iterative process of social evolution based on spiritual principles. The establishment of institutions and social forms conducive to realizing world unity is essential for building a society that encourages the full intellectual, emotional, and spiritual development of its members. At the same time, the development within each individual of spiritual qualities such as respect, compassion, selflessness, creativity, and motivation to serve is essential to building a global society that can maintain higher levels of unity and motivate the fundamental changes in structures and values required by an ethic of sustainability. Such a degree of social unity and motivation cannot be achieved within a materialistic value system. In a more direct way, spiritual development and service to the greater whole satisfy the inextinguishable human hunger for meaning and purpose, and are the only antidotes to the futile search for fulfillment through consumption, status-seeking, and other dysfunctional behaviors that are destructive towards self, society, and Nature.

It is within the context of this iterative process of social change, allied with the application of scientific knowledge guided by spiritual principles, that truly sustainable models of production and habitation can emerge. In other words, the advancement of a new set of values in relation to Nature and the unfolding of a global order that can effectively address environment and development issues both depend on the enhancement of the only infinite resource in the face of depleting material resources—human spiritual potential.

This in barest outline is the model of social evolution suggested by Bahá'u'lláh's writings. It is a model that the Baha'i community itself has embarked on developing and demonstrating in its own efforts at the local, national, and international levels.

Summary

The writings of the Bahá'í Faith offer a vision of fundamental global transformation that embodies a new set of principles for understanding and guiding humanity's relationship to Nature. The religious impulse they contain is a comprehensive source of spiritual, social, and intellectual resources for meeting the challenges of that necessary transformation. They affirm that the realization of a spiritualized world order, which has been the promise of the sacred scriptures of all ages, is now the potential and requirement of our time.

Elements of this transformative vision include an affirmation of the divine within creation and an elaboration of the essential unity of the material and spiritual dimensions throughout the whole evolutionary process. Humanity, as a unique, self-conscious part of this communion of life, has gone through a progressive developmental process. The prevailing social order represents an adolescent stage of this development. Having passed from the dependence of childhood through the impetuous autonomy-seeking stage of adolescence, humanity is now at the point of transition to conscious maturity. The long historical journey to becoming conscious beings through separation from Nature is culminating in a mature understanding of life's profound interrelatedness.

The Bahá'í writings suggest that this process of maturation requires an expanded religious consciousness both complementing and integral to our scientific advancement. It is only in this context that the latent capacities of the human spirit can be fully quickened and released. Spiritual growth is limitless and, being central to human fulfillment and a fruition of human purpose within the whole evolution of life, is a requirement for creating an ecologically sustainable social order.

To help foster the release of individual spiritual potential and focus it as a force for global transformation and moral regeneration, institutions founded on a comprehensive vision of unity need to be established. The emergence of a new world order requires appropriate institutions for global coordination and for fostering individual and community empowerment. The Bahá'í International Community is itself an embryonic model for such a process of ordered social transformation.

This process of transformation is neither idealistic nor utopian—in the face of the disastrous ecological and human consequences that face us if we continue with “business as usual”—this is the new realism. This transformation is possible because the forces that propelled life's evolution from the beginning are still operating within human society. There is reason to believe that the mysterious forces that have “shaped the planet under our feet” and “guided life through its bewildering variety of expression” in natural ecosystems and human cultures “have not suddenly collapsed under the great volume of human affairs in this late twentieth century” (Berry, *Dream* 47).

In conclusion, the Bahá'í writings offer a vision of wholeness in our relationship to Nature and of spiritual purpose in the whole evolution of life that empowers individuals to become agents of transformation in developing an ecologically sustainable global civilization.

Appendix

This article concentrates on the basic principles of the Bahá'í Faith as they reflect on our relationship to the natural world. In addition to the ideational level, a positive relationship is enhanced by both symbology and practice. At the symbolic level, innumerable references are made throughout the Bahá'í writings and prayers to organic analogies, such as trees, gardens, orchards, and the body. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke of “this earthly paradise,” the “ocean of God’s mercy,” the “invigorating breeze of love and fellowship,” and the “living waters of friendliness.” Humanity’s unity is represented as the “waves of one sea, as the leaves of one tree.” Revelation itself is referred to as a “divine springtime” through which the Earth becomes “verdant and blooming.” In speaking of the principle of unity in diversity, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty. (*Selections* 291)

These metaphors are used to illustrate spiritual principles and invoke a particular feeling that the founders of the Bahá'í Faith associated with Nature. They represent the fact that all the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith had a fond love and a strongly expressed need for contact with the beauty of Nature and the countryside. Bahá'u'lláh throughout his long years of exile suffered isolation from people and the countryside he loved so much. Knowing his love for plants, many of the Bahá'ís who traveled from Iran to visit Bahá'u'lláh in Acre brought plants with them, often refraining from drinking the little water they carried across the desert so that it could be saved for the plants. Denied access to the city, they made a garden with these flowers outside Acre. In the latter years of his life, when Bahá'u'lláh was allowed out of Acre under the conditions of house arrest, he took up residence in a country house

outside the city. There, beautiful gardens were created and have been further developed today, as have other magnificent gardens at the Bahá'í administrative center on the slopes of Mount Carmel. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi also maintained a deep love for gardens and Nature. Many of the Bahá'í gardens in the Haifa/Acre area were designed by Shoghi Effendi, who was also fond of taking solitary treks in the mountain country of Europe.

Notes

1. This quotation from the Persian book *Makátíb* (unpublished in English) was cited by Bahiyyih Nakhjavani on page 13 of her book *Response*.
2. Though a developmental sequence is suggested, there is no indication of cultural superiority. Different cultural streams have explored and developed different capacities that are all integral to the current period of reconciliation.
3. The word *matter* has evolved from our original understanding of the Earth as “mother.” The word for mother in Greek is spelled *meter*; in Latin, *mater*; and in Sanskrit, *matr*.

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