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THE HARMONY OF SCIENCE AND RELIGION

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The principle of the unity of science and religion is one of the foundational teachings of the Bahá'í Faith ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* no. 71). It was first articulated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His travels in Europe and North America between 1911 and 1913, where He proclaimed to audiences in the cultural and economic capitals of the West that both science and religion are vital, necessary, and indeed spiritual endeavours in humanity's collective evolution towards the realization of its highest potential.

To a gathering in Paris in 1911 'Abdu'l-Bahá said: 'We may think of science as one wing and religion as the other; a bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless' (*Paris* 130–131). To an audience in London that same year, He said:

Religion and Science are intertwined with each other and cannot be separated. These are the two wings with which humanity must fly. One wing is not enough. Every religion which does not concern itself with Science is mere tradition, and that is not the essential.
(*London* 28–29)

And at a meeting in New York in 1912, He said: 'The fundamental principles of the Prophets are scientific, but the forms and imitations which have appeared [from religion] are opposed to science. If religion does not agree with science, it is superstition and ignorance' (*Promulgation* 128). Numerous similar statements were made in the course of His Western travels and in letters written from this time.

While not explicitly stated in the writings of the Báb or Bahá'u'lláh, the principle of the harmony of science and religion is a direct consequence of their teachings on the nature of reality:

‘Bahá’u’lláh has . . . reconciled science with religion by revealing the pure teachings of the divine reality’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 231). By Bahá’u’lláh’s own declaration, His teachings are at their heart a re-expression of timeless truths—‘This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future’ (Kitáb-i-Aqdas para. 182)—and many can be readily identified as perennial themes in the spiritual and philosophical traditions of East and West. However, it is in the context of the Bahá’í teachings and through their view of humanity’s progressive and ever-evolving encounter with the divine that these teachings are understood as grounding a worldview in which science is seen as essentially in harmony with religion.

Ineffability, metaphor, and epistemic humility

At the heart of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings is the principle of the ineffability of ultimate Reality and the inability of human minds to conceive it or of human language to express it:

All that the sages and mystics have said or written have never exceeded, nor can they ever hope to exceed, the limitations to which man’s finite mind hath been strictly subjected. To whatever heights the mind of the most exalted of men may soar, however great the depths which the detached and understanding heart can penetrate, such mind and heart can never transcend that which is the creature of their own conceptions and the product of their own thoughts.

(*Gleanings* no. 148)

For Bahá’u’lláh, epistemic humility is thus identified with the highest degree of human attainment:

Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Daystar of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man’s development.

(*Gleanings* no. 83)

As a consequence of the inherent limitations of thought and language, the deepest descriptions of reality, as narrated, for example, in the world’s sacred books and spiritual traditions, must be couched in the language of metaphor. As told by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a statement itself couched in metaphor:

[I]t is from the luminous cup of metaphors and the ethereal chalice of similes that they that are sore athirst in the vale of bewilderment are given to quaff the life-giving wine of inner truth and knowledge . . . that the birds of human minds and understandings may soar beyond the nests of perplexity and bewilderment.

(*Makátib* 2: 8, provisional translation)

While certain materialistic philosophers are chided for their lack of epistemic humility and for their ontological flattening of the world—on several occasions ‘Abdu’l-Bahá playfully compares them to ‘cows’ in their shared ignorance of higher realities (*Promulgation* nos. 90, 101, 111)—the harshest condemnation is reserved for those religious adherents who, mistaking the metaphorical

language of their sacred scriptures for literal truths and adhering to miraculous accounts whose true meaning is to be found in the symbolic, have become the cause of much of the conflict in the world, whether between different faith communities or between science and religion:

All religions of the present day have fallen into superstitious practices, out of harmony alike with the true principles of the teaching they represent and with the scientific discoveries of the time. Many religious leaders have grown to think that the importance of religion lies mainly in the adherence to a collection of certain dogmas and the practice of rites and ceremonies! Those whose souls they profess to cure are taught to believe likewise, and these cling tenaciously to the outward forms, confusing them with the inward truth. Now, these forms and rituals differ in the various churches and amongst the different sects, and even contradict one another; giving rise to discord, hatred, and disunion. The outcome of all this dissension is the belief of many cultured men that religion and science are contradictory terms, that religion needs no powers of reflection, and should in no wise be regulated by science, but must of necessity be opposed, the one to the other. The unfortunate effect of this is that science has drifted apart from religion, and religion has become a mere blind and more or less apathetic following of the precepts of certain religious teachers, who insist on their own favorite dogmas being accepted even when they are contrary to science. This is foolishness, for it is quite evident that science is the light, and, being so, religion truly so-called does not oppose knowledge. We are familiar with the phrases 'Light and Darkness,' 'Religion and Science.' But the religion which does not walk hand in hand with science is itself in the darkness of superstition and ignorance. Much of the discord and disunion of the world is created by these man-made oppositions and contradictions.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris* no. 44)

As to the contents of these metaphors themselves, two related metaphors explaining the origins of the universe, both of ancient origin (characteristically Neoplatonist but with even earlier roots) and reaffirmed in the Bahá’í teachings, provide the theological foundation of the Bahá’í view of science in harmony with religion, although, as with other metaphors of the sacred, they can be mistakenly interpreted along literal lines.

The intelligibility of the universe and the elevation of rational thought

The first of these metaphors is that the universe is the creation of a ‘mind’ or ordering principle, called variously in the Bahá’í Writings the ‘Primal Will’ (*mashíyyat-i-ulá*), ‘First Intellect’ (*al-‘aql-i-awwal*), and the ‘word of God’ (*kalimátu’lláh*, the *logos* of the ancient Greeks and the Gospel of John) (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 53). It is typically anthropomorphized as the action of a divine Being Who has a specific plan and loving intention for creation. As Bahá’u’lláh stated, assuming the voice of the Divine: ‘I loved thy creation, hence I created Thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life’ (*Arabic Hidden Words* no. 4).

The work of ‘mind’ leaves its imprint within all things, from the form and function of living creatures to the structure of physical law itself. As such, it transcends the usual interpretation of mind as a faculty strictly connected with the human brain. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá employed such an expansive definition of mind when He stated, ‘All that we see around us is the work of mind. It is mind in the herb and in the mineral that acts on the human body, and changes its condition’ (*London* 95).

The pervasiveness of mind within all things explains why the universe is intelligible and why it follows predictable and orderly laws which improbably yield up their secrets to rational investigation. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated, ‘nature is subject to a sound organization, to inviolable laws, to a perfect order, and to a consummate design, from which it never departs’ (*Some Answered Questions* no. 1). The scientist who is able to deduce the mathematical form of these laws is thus accorded the highest praise:

The greatest attainment in the world of humanity has ever been scientific in nature. It is the discovery of the realities of things. . . . The highest praise is due to men who devote their energies to science, and the noblest center is a center wherein the sciences and arts are taught and studied. . . . Verily, mind is the supreme gift of God. Verily, intellect is the effulgence of God.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 348–350)

Emanation and degrees of being; essential relationships

The second and related metaphor which deeply informs the Bahá’í concept of the relationship between science and religion is that the creation of the universe takes place through an eternal process of ‘emanation’: it is like the rays of the sun, which partake of the attributes of the sun (light and heat) and are sustained at every moment by its shining, while remaining separate from it in essence (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 53). And, similar to how the rays of the sun travel progressively further from their source, the process of emanation takes place in stages or degrees comprising a descending arc (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 81).

The stages in this ‘arc of descent’ can be observed in the ancient division of being into mineral, vegetable, animal, and human kingdoms (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 55). Through these degrees, which are degrees of gradually awakening consciousness, an infinite diversity of expressions is produced, through which the purpose of creation in manifesting the divine names and attributes is best fulfilled (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 32).

The pattern of the original source is repeated within each stage of the emanative arc, whether on the arc of descent or the arc of ascent, introducing a principle of correspondence between different degrees of being:

Know thou that whatsoever can be found in this mortal world, this realm of limitation—every name and description, every form and attribute that can be seen or heard—hath, in each world of the worlds of God, manifestations and appearances corresponding to and befitting that world, and appearing with another name, another description, another form and another attribute.

(Bahá’u’lláh, *Má’idiy-i-Āsamání* 7: 120, provisional translation)

This relationship of correspondence holds true between the degrees of being often called the ‘material’ and the ‘spiritual’: ‘The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world. They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 10), although, viewing the emanative arc as a whole, the very division of the world into a physical and a spiritual dimension is a consequence of our limited human perspective. At any point in the circle of existence, the ‘spiritual’ is simply a term for the degrees which lie ahead:

the truth is that the world of existence is a single world, although its stations are manifold in accordance with the manifold realities of things. For instance, the world of

mineral, plant, and animal existence is the same world. Despite this, the animal world in relation to the world of the vegetable is a spiritual reality and another world and abode.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, Amr va *Khalq* 1: 202, provisional translation)

The relativizing of the categories of the material and the spiritual into matters of perspective, which is a feature of the holistic viewpoint of emanation, is particularly evident in the identical definitions given to 'religion' and 'nature' as comprising the interrelationships that bind all things together:

[R]eligion consists in the necessary relationships deriving from the realities of things.

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* no. 40)

By nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things.

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Forel* 13)

The same principle can also be seen at work in the collapsing by Bahá'u'lláh of the traditionally distinct categories of natural action and divine action:

Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise. Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion.

(*Tablets* 142)

The relativity of religious truth

While the consequences of the rich metaphors of 'mind', 'emanation', and related ideas for the conception of the essential unity of science and religion, as cast through the lens of the Bahá'í teachings, are far-reaching, the Bahá'í Writings nowhere propose that differing conceptions of the divine and its relationship with the world can somehow be reduced to a single correct dogmatic formulation. They rather acknowledge that diversity of viewpoint, even in matters of ultimate theological import, is a feature of the human condition, for religious truth is relative—in time, between one era of human civilization and the next, but also between different people at the same point in time:

[S]ince all do not possess the same degree of spiritual understanding, certain statements will inevitably be made, and there shall arise, as a consequence, as many differing opinions as there are human minds and as many divergent beliefs as there are created things. This is certain and settled, and can in no wise be averted. . . . Our aim is that thou shouldst urge all the believers to show forth kindness and mercy and to overlook certain shortcomings among them, that differences may be dispelled; true harmony be established; and the censure and reproach, the hatred and dissension, seen among the peoples of former times may not arise anew.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Call* 3.6–7)

Therefore, a diversity of views about science and religion can be expected to persist into the future, from those who, informed by metaphysical dualism, present science and religion as

essentially separate domains of knowledge to those who pursue more non-dualistic themes that stress the unity that lies behind the world of ever-changing appearances. These views are able to coexist within the community through a shared conviction that a greater harmony underlies its differences, through mutual love and respect, and through a consultative framework that ensures that action is taken in unity even when differences persist. The ultimate test of all such theories, for Bahá'ís, is whether they function as remedies: whether they serve the cause of actuating human potential and propelling forward an ever-advancing civilization consistently with established facts.

Religion and divine teachings are like unto a remedy. A remedy must produce the condition of health. If it occasions sickness, it is wiser and better to have no remedy whatever. This is the significance of the statement that if religion becomes the cause of warfare and bloodshed, irreligion and the absence of religion are preferable among mankind.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 298)

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