

DIVINE PHILOSOPHY AND THE GIFT OF UNDERSTANDING

2001 - Swaziland

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I. Introduction

In its Ridván, 1990 letter the Universal House of Justice advised the Bahá'í world that, despite having achieved 'a marvelous diversity in the large numbers of ethnic groups represented in the Faith', there was 'another category of diversity which must be built up'. This was a category 'without which', the Universal House of Justice warned, 'the Cause will not be able adequately to meet the challenges being thrust upon it'. The Cause now had to begin to 'embrace increasing numbers of people of capacity, including persons of accomplishment and prominence in the various fields of human endeavour'. In the same Ridván message the Supreme Body advised that, in the worsening world situation, 'increasing calls will be made upon our community to assist, through advice and practical measures', in 'solving critical social problems'.

One of the critical social problems in the world, a problem which in southern Africa seriously affects social stability and is a major contributor to the highly disturbing social disintegration we see about us, a problem which Bahá'ís are uniquely qualified to address, both within and outside the Community, is lack of understanding of religion and a type of inability to reason.

By this I do not mean inability to think and reason along the lines of contemporary knowledge and science, but an inability to reason in a different way.

In a particular passage from the Kitab-i-Asma – the Book of Names – the Báb appears to divide mankind into two groups.

"Say, verily God hath caused all created things to enter beneath the shade of the tree of affirmation, except those who are endowed with the faculty of understanding." (The Báb: Selections from the Báb, Page: 147)

This latter group – those '*endowed with the faculty of understanding*' – He further divides into two groups: those who '*believe in God*' and those who '*shut themselves out from Him*'.

"These two groups sail upon two seas: the sea of affirmation and the sea of negation." (The Báb: Selections from the Báb, Page: 147)

In our teaching, therefore, we have a twofold task. One is to so deepen those who are ‘*under the shade of the tree of affirmation*’ and who have accepted the Faith – or to so educate them, if they are Bahá’í children – that they will acquire the faculty of understanding. The second task is to bring those who **have** this faculty of understanding, but who have ‘*shut themselves out from Him*’, into the Faith.

The importance of these tasks cannot be overestimated. In the past it was sufficient to believe. In this day it is not; one must recognize, which means essentially that one must believe and understand.

“*The greatest gift of God to man is the gift of understanding*”, and independent investigation of the truth is one of the fundamental principles of the Faith of God in this day. With the launching of the institute process throughout the Bahá’í world, the Universal House of Justice has initiated something which is unprecedented in religious history. In the past only the clergy – and even then, only rare individuals among the clergy – had the knowledge and understanding to successfully teach and to defend their Faith against ‘the people of negation’. The rank and file were not given the option to decide for themselves in matters of belief, and being denied this option they became severely restricted in their ability to consolidate their religious thinking, and, thus, to propagate and defend their Faith. In this Dispensation such power has been released that every person on the planet has been given the power to choose, and every believer has been given the independent power to teach, if properly educated. It is through the Institutes and their successors, the schools and universities destined to arise in the future, that this education will, in time, reach every member of the community.

To these two duties, directly related to teaching, may be added a third: to bring the principles of divine philosophy to bear upon our chosen professions, and so to stimulate the development and evolution of those professions.

II. Divine Philosophy

In His talks in the West ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeatedly identified the root of religious prejudice as being ‘imitation’ of ‘ancestral forms’.

It is evident that prejudices arising from adherence to religious forms and imitation of ancestral beliefs have hindered the progress of humanity thousands of years.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page 39)

It was not just a new morality which was needed in the world – it was a new way of thinking. The minds of men had to be reoriented.

If we review history, we will observe that human advancement has been greatest in the development of material virtues. Civilization is the sign and evidence of this progression. Throughout the world, material civilization has attained truly wonderful heights and degrees of efficiency - that is to say, the outward powers and virtues of man have greatly developed, but the inner and ideal virtues have been correspondingly delayed and

neglected. It is now the time in the history of the world for us to strive and give an impetus to the advancement and development of inner forces - that is to say, we must arise to service in the world of morality, for human morals are in need of readjustment. We must also render service to the world of intellectuality in order that the minds of men may increase in power and become keener in perception, assisting the intellect of man to attain its supremacy so that the ideal virtues may appear.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Pages 325,326)

This ‘world of intellectuality’ is not part of the material world. It is, rather, the world described by Bahá’u’lláh in the Second Valley of The Four Valleys:

If the wayfarer's goal be the dwelling of the Praiseworthy One (Mahmud), this is the station of primal reason which is known as the Prophet and the Most Great Pillar. Here reason signifieth the divine, universal mind, whose sovereignty enlighteneth all created things..."Knowledge is a light which God casteth into the heart of whomsoever He willeth."

(Bahá’u’lláh: Seven Valleys and Four Valleys, Pages 52-54)

In God Passes By the beloved Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, describes The Hidden Words, Bahá’u’lláh’s greatest ethical work, as “this dynamic spiritual leaven cast into the life of the world **for the reorientation of the minds of men**, the edification of their souls and the rectification of their conduct

(Shoghi Effendi: God Passes By, Page 140)

We need in the world today not only the rectification of our conduct, and the edification of our souls, but the reorientation of our minds. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that there are two types of philosophy: natural philosophy and divine philosophy.

Philosophy is of two kinds: natural and divine. Natural philosophy seeks knowledge of physical verities and explains material phenomena, whereas divine philosophy deals with ideal verities and phenomena of the spirit. The field and scope of natural philosophy have been greatly enlarged, and its accomplishments are most praiseworthy, for it has served humanity. But according to the evidence of present world conditions divine philosophy - which has for its object the sublimation of human nature, spiritual advancement, heavenly guidance for the development of the human race, attainment to the breaths of the Holy Spirit and knowledge of the verities of God - has been outdistanced and neglected. Now is the time for us to make an effort and enable it to advance apace with the philosophy of material investigation so that awakening of the ideal virtues may progress equally with the unfoldment of the natural powers.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Pages 326,327)

It is divine philosophy which illumines our own understanding and which will make us unshakably firm in the spiritual principles of religion. It is through divine philosophy that “confidence will be inspired and faith attained. Then and then only the reality of things will be revealed to us.”[Promulgation of Universal Peace, page 327]. It is through divine philosophy, I would surmise, that our own mental powers will be increased and we will

be empowered to teach the Faith to the ‘*people of negation*’. For divine philosophy utilizes arguments based on reason to prove the great principles and truths of Reality.

One of the great legacies given us by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His talks and tablets is the outline and content of divine philosophy, as well as expositions and proofs of some of its most abstruse truths. In Some Answered Questions, The Tablet to Dr Forel, Promulgation of Universal Peace, Paris Talks, The Secret of Divine Civilization, He has left an incomparable legacy for our intellectual reorientation.

What are the pressing questions of divine philosophy? I have not attempted to categorize them, but at this stage wish merely to catalogue some of them:

Religion and the oneness of humanity

The great question appertaining to humanity is religion. The first condition is that man must intelligently investigate its foundations. The second condition is that he must admit and acknowledge the oneness of the world of humanity.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page 327)

This ‘*second condition*’, the oneness of the world of humanity, the unity of mankind, is in another talk called ‘*The most important principle of divine philosophy*’

Proofs of the existence and bounty of God

Before a step is taken in this direction we must be able to prove Divinity from the standpoint of reason so that no doubt or objection may remain for the rationalist. Afterward, we must be able to prove the existence of the bounty of God - that the divine bounty encompasses humanity and that it is transcendental.

(‘Abdu’l-Baha: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page: 326]

If you should ask a thousand persons, "What are the proofs of the reality of Divinity?" perhaps not one would be able to answer. If you should ask further, "What proofs have you regarding the essence of God?" "How do you explain inspiration and revelation?" "What are the evidences of conscious intelligence beyond the material universe?" "Can you suggest a plan and method for the betterment of human moralities?" "Can you clearly define and differentiate the world of nature and the world of Divinity?" - you would receive very little real knowledge and enlightenment upon these questions. This is due to the fact that development of the ideal virtues has been neglected. People speak of Divinity, but the ideas and beliefs they have of Divinity are, in reality, superstition. Divinity is the effulgence of the Sun of Reality, the manifestation of spiritual virtues and ideal powers. The intellectual proofs of Divinity are based upon observation and evidence which constitute decisive argument, logically proving the reality of Divinity, the effulgence of mercy, the certainty of inspiration and immortality of the spirit. This is, in reality, the science of Divinity. Divinity is not what is set forth in dogmas and sermons of the church. Ordinarily when the word Divinity is mentioned, it is associated in the minds of the hearers with certain formulas and doctrines, whereas it essentially means the

wisdom and knowledge of God, the effulgence of the Sun of Truth, the revelation of reality and divine philosophy.

(`Abdu'l-Baha: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page 326]

The immortality of the human soul

Furthermore, we must demonstrate that the spirit of man is immortal, that it is not subject to disintegration and that it comprises the virtues of humanity.

(`Abdu'l-Baha: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page 326)

Life and Death

According to divine philosophy there are two important and universal conditions in the world of material phenomena: one which concerns life, the other concerning death; one relative to existence, the other nonexistence; one manifest in composition, the other in decomposition.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page 87)

The oneness of all things

I shall discourse upon a subject involving one of the divine questions, a question of religious and metaphysical importance - namely, the progressive and perpetual motion of elemental atoms throughout the various degrees of phenomena and the kingdoms of existence. It will be demonstrated and become evident that the origin and outcome of phenomena are identical and that there is an essential oneness in all existing things. This is a subtle principle appertaining to divine philosophy and requiring close analysis and attention.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page 284)

Inasmuch as the fundamental principle of the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness of the world of humanity, I will speak to you upon the intrinsic oneness of all phenomena. This is one of the abstruse subjects of divine philosophy.

Fundamentally all existing things pass through the same degrees and phases of development, and any given phenomenon embodies all others.

(`Abdu'l-Bahá: Promulgation of Universal Peace, Page 349)

III. Learning and Teaching Divine Philosophy

How do we learn and become thoroughly conversant with the principles and arguments of divine philosophy? How do we teach the Faith using the arguments of divine philosophy? How do we teach divine philosophy, its truths, principles and arguments, to children and youth, Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í? And finally, how do we bring the principles of divine philosophy to bear on our own professions? Virtually all professions current today – engineering, medicine, law, business, computer science and information technology, physics and mathematics – have been formulated independently of principles

of divine philosophy. To the extent some of those principles may be incorporated in them, has been accidental and haphazard.

In one of His powerful passages Bahá'u'lláh warns,

Beware, O people of Bahá, lest the strong ones of the earth rob you of your strength, or they who rule the world fill you with fear...

(Shoghi Effendi: The Advent of Divine Justice, Page 82)

I personally feel that for Bahá'í professionals to accept their professions as is, without striving to add to them by bringing principals of divine philosophy to bear on them, is, in effect, allowing the '*strong ones of the earth*' to rob us of our strength, and '*those who rule the world*' to fill us with fear.

One of the most challenging tasks facing us in the years ahead will be to teach the essentials of divine philosophy in our children's classes, hopefully to non-Bahá'í children as well as Bahá'í children. In The Tablets of the Divine Plan 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that Bahá'í youth should be taught "*all the divine proofs and irrefragable arguments*".

The Writings indicate that these principles and arguments are best taught through the guided use of questions. This is the method used in the Youth Enrichment Programme. It is a method also used in the Ruhi programmes. As we continue to gain valuable experience with the Ruhi material we will begin to modify it to be more in keeping with what I feel is the brilliant potential for investigation resident in African people.

IV. Conclusion

In many places in our writings we are told of the capacity of the black people, who Bahá'u'lláh compared to "*the black pupil of the eye*", through which "*the light of the spirit shineth forth*".

It is interesting, to me, that what I consider to be 'Abdu'l-Bahá's greatest talk on science, a talk in which He explains that science is a spiritual, rather than a material, pursuit, and in which He links science with '*the means by which man finds a pathway to God*', that this talk was delivered to an African American audience at the Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., in the United States.

In my experience Africans, above all other people, have an unmatched capacity for divine philosophy; an unmatched capacity for the creative discovery and application of arguments based on reason to prove the great truths of Reality.

It is a capacity the Bahá'í communities of southern Africa must assiduously develop.