

THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a systematic and comprehensive overview of Baha’i theology and philosophy. Since Bahá’í thought is still in very nascent stages of development, without any established philosophical or theological schools, it is discussed within the comparative framework of what has already been long established in both of these scholarly fields. Bahá’í religious texts contain a great deal of philosophical passages and speculation, sometimes of a highly technical nature. Bahá’í scriptures make use of such Aristotelian terms as essence, substance, essential and accidental attributes, four-fold causality, potentiality, and its actualization, and so on. In addition to Aristotelian philosophical ideas, the Bahá’í Writings make use of a Neoplatonist concept of emanation. Overall, the article explores Bahá’í views in the areas of epistemology, ontology, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of religion and history, social and political philosophy, ethics, and aesthetics.

Introduction

It is rather difficult to define theology and philosophy; dictionaries provide a variety of definitions, even within their own articles on the subject. The Oxford dictionary describes theology as the ‘study of the nature of God and religious belief’ or as ‘[r]eligious beliefs and theory when systematically developed.’ Naturally, the most common method of theological inquiry consists of the interpretation of scriptures. As for philosophy, the Oxford English dictionary defines it as the ‘study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence, especially when considered as an academic discipline’. In the sense of the pursuit of wisdom, Merriam-Webster describes philosophy as ‘a search for a general understanding of values and reality by chiefly speculative rather than observational means’.

Theology and philosophy can be either developed separately or joined together in the form of scriptural philosophy. In the second case, religious scriptures become part of rational philosophical discourse. In the Middle Ages, the scriptural type of philosophy flourished in many religious traditions, including Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam. Since the fourteenth century in Christianity, however, theology was detached from philosophy on the grounds that they have occupy separate domains.

Theology was dealing with divine matters—the existence and nature of God, the angelic world, life after death and spiritual immortality. Since those subjects were not accessible to human experience and observation, they were excluded from philosophical discussion. Philosophy, in its turn, now concerned itself only with the world of nature that is available to human perception and rationality.

General remarks

Based on epistemological criteria i. e., the way humans acquire knowledge, philosophical systems are divided into five kinds: empiricist (Locke), rationalist (Descartes), traditionalist (Confucius), intuitivist (Bergson), and scriptural (Aquinas). In the history of philosophy there were six major waves of scriptural reasoning —Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and now Bahá'í.

Bahá'í philosophy originates not solely as a way of supporting by rational arguments the reality of faith and the authority of scriptures. Bahá'í religious texts themselves contain a great deal of philosophical passages and speculation, sometimes of a highly technical nature. The founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, revealed the Tablet of Wisdom, which specifically elaborates on certain philosophical issues. He asserts in it that the 'essence and the fundamentals of philosophy have emanated from the Prophets,' and that a 'true philosopher would never deny God nor His evidences, rather would he acknowledge His glory and overpowering majesty which overshadow all created

things' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 449, 452). Among various philosophers of old He mentions in the tablet, Bahá'u'lláh (450) especially favors Socrates: 'What a penetrating vision into philosophy this eminent man had! He is the most distinguished of all philosophers and was highly versed in wisdom. We testify that he is one of the heroes in this field and an outstanding champion dedicated unto it'.

The eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh and the leader of the Faith since His father passing, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His talks distinguishes between natural and divine philosophy, whose purpose is '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' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 326–27). He continues: 'The philosophers of Greece—such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato and others—were devoted to the investigation of both natural and spiritual phenomena...This was the reason of the triumph and survival of their teachings and principles.' 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges philosophers to develop the spiritual or divine aspect of philosophy: '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' (237).

In His writings and speeches 'Abdu'l-Bahá employs mostly Aristotelian philosophical terminology, with occasional neo-platonic add-ons. Bahá'í scriptures make use of such Aristotelian terms as essence, substance, essential and accidental attributes, four-fold causality, potentiality, and its actualization, and so on. Most of the concepts are explicitly restated and confirmed in the writings in their original Aristotelian usage (Kluge 2003). In *Some Answered Questions*, for instance, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (80: 3) reaffirms the Aristotelian understanding of causality: '...the existence of each and every thing depends upon four causes: the efficient cause, the material cause, the formal cause, and the final cause. So this chair has a creator who is a carpenter, a matter which is wood, a form which is that of a

chair, and a purpose which is to serve as a seat'. Other concepts—such as hylomorphism and teleology i. e. beliefs that (1) all entities are composed of matter and form, and that (2) phenomenal existence has design and purpose—are implicitly embedded in the Bahá'í teachings. The fact that the Bahá'í Writings use Aristotelian terminology, however, does not mean that Bahá'í thought represents a branch of Aristotelian philosophy. The founders of the Bahá'í Faith use Aristotle's approach to study reality in order to develop their own unique philosophical worldview.

In addition to Aristotelian philosophical ideas, the Bahá'í Writings make use of a Neoplatonist concept of emanation. Introduced into philosophical thinking by Plotinus in the third century CE, emanation explains the relation between the Divine and the creaturely by describing a series of emanations that descend from the Godhead and form the world of creation while never diminishing in any way the nature of divinity. The notion of consecutive emanations in ancient pagan thought may have appeared to oppose and suggest an alternative to the Judeo-Christian doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* as one simple and direct creative act of God. The concept of emanation, however, along with Neoplatonic thought in general, exerted a lasting influence upon Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophy, especially in its esoteric or mystical forms.

'Abdu'l-Bahá also uses the idea of emanation to describe a continuous flow of creation that is eternal, i. e., without beginning or end. He blends both concepts by defining emanation as one of the forms of creation, along with second one, of manifestation. In *Some Answered Questions* 'Abdu'l-Bahá (54: 2) says: 'Emanational procession is like the procession of the handiwork from its author. For example, the writing proceeds from the writer. Now, just as the writing emanates from the writer and the discourse from the speaker, so does the human spirit emanate from God'.

Aside from multiple references to classical Greek philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, the Bahá'í Writings also address modern philosophical concerns. 'Abdu'l-Bahá rarely calls those

thinkers by name, but He discusses various themes and concepts that preoccupied the minds of His contemporaries, especially those of social and political nature. In His numerous talks in Europe and North America in 1911–12, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reflects upon the station and conditions of nature and humanity, advocates the importance of social justice and the rule of law, defends individual human rights, including religious freedom, and offers His critique of positivism and materialist philosophy in general.

Both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá left a massive number of texts for the generations of researchers to translate, study, and comprehend in their entirety. At this point Bahá’í thought is still in very nascent stages of development, without any established philosophical or theological schools. Likewise, no ‘official’ positions on many topics of philosophical and theological significance have yet emerged within the Bahá’í community and its leadership. It is easiest, therefore, to discuss Bahá’í philosophy and theology within the comparative framework of what has already been long established in both of these scholarly fields.

Epistemology

‘Abdu’l-Bahá distinguishes between two forms of knowledge—subjective and objective or ‘existential’ and ‘formal,’ ‘that is, intuitive knowledge and conceptual knowledge’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 40: 2). ‘The knowledge that people generally have of things consists in conceptualization and observation,’ He says, and the ‘scope of this knowledge is quite limited, as it is conditioned upon acquisition and attainment’ (40: 3). ‘The other kind of knowledge,’ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continues, ‘which is existential or intuitive knowledge, is like man’s knowledge and awareness of his own self...This knowledge is not the result of effort and acquisition: It is an existential matter; it is pure bounty’ (40: 4–5).

Intuitive or inner knowledge is refined and perfected by means of meditation, which, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out, ‘is the key for opening the doors of mysteries. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 175). The intuitive abilities of the human mind can be realized both in conscious and unconscious states, especially during sleep when humans see dreams and visions, and could even involve communication with departed souls: ‘A conversation can be held, but not as our [physical] conversation. . .The heart of man is open to inspiration; this is spiritual communication. As in a dream one talks with a friend while the mouth is silent, so is it in the conversation of the spirit’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 179).

Human intuition is also the source of revelation, which is reserved only for special human beings who are called in the Bahá’í Writings the ‘Manifestations of God’ and are known in religious history as the founders of great spiritual traditions. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, ‘Since those sanctified realities, the universal Manifestations of God, encompass all created things. . .transcend and discover all existing realities, and...are cognizant of all things, it follows that Their knowledge is divine and not acquired—that is, it is a heavenly grace and a divine discovery (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 40: 6). As a result, ‘the universal Manifestations of God are aware of the truths underlying the mysteries of all created things, and thus They found a religion that is based upon, and consonant with, the prevailing condition of humanity’ (40: 8).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also discusses the four sources of human cognition—sensory perception, rationality, inspiration or intuition, and tradition. He argues that all those standards of knowledge are liable to error. Senses can betray us; our intellect could be mistaken as well. Sacred traditions, which are the result of rational comprehension of holy texts, could also be wrong because of the general fallibility of human reason. Even intuition or illumination cannot be fully relied upon since those ‘promptings or

susceptibilities of the human heart,' as 'Abdu'l-Bahá cautions, 'are sometimes satanic. How are we to differentiate them? How are we to tell whether a given statement is an inspiration and prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance or through the satanic agency?' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 254).

Human knowledge is also limited in two other respects. First, we have no access to the essences of the objects of cognition, only to their qualities. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, 'there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its attributes. The essence of a thing is known only through its attributes; otherwise, that essence is unknown and unfathomed' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 59: 3). As a result, we do not have a direct knowledge of the essence of nature, our own selves, or of Divinity.

Second, lower forms of life cannot comprehend the higher ones or, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, the 'difference in degree is ever an obstacle to comprehension of the higher by the lower, the superior by the inferior' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 173). He further explains: 'A lower degree cannot comprehend a higher although all are in the same world of creation—whether mineral, vegetable or animal. . .In the human plane...we have knowledge of a vegetable, its qualities and product; but the vegetable has no knowledge or comprehension whatever of us' (114).

Given all those limitations of human cognition, how can we be assured that the knowledge we acquire is accurate? 'Abdu'l-Bahá recommends combining all four methods of knowledge in order to arrive at the certainty of truth. As he puts it: '...a statement presented to the mind accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct' (255). Yet in comparison with divine illumination, human cognition is still inadequate and unsatisfactory. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: 'Briefly the point is that in the human material

world of phenomena these four are the only existing criteria or avenues of knowledge, and all of them are faulty and unreliable. What then remains? How shall we attain the reality of knowledge? By the breaths and promptings of the Holy Spirit, which is light and knowledge itself.’ He concludes: ‘All available human criteria are erroneous and defective, but the divine standard of knowledge is infallible’ (22).

Ontology

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that asks the question: what is reality? Or—what does really exist? In the history of philosophy there were three types of ontological systems—monism, dualism, and pluralism. Philosophical monism is an ontological teaching that reduces the multiplicity of objects in the universe to one underlying principle—God, Atman, Tao, matter, and so on. Philosophical dualism rejects the metaphysical idea of singleness and asserts that everything in creation runs in pairs—spirit and matter, yin and yang, mind and body, etc. Philosophical pluralism affirms the impossibility to reduce the variety of objects into anything single or dual.

From the perspective of the history of philosophy, Bahá’í ontology—as is the case with various other theological and philosophical issues—offers a comprehensive and conciliatory approach by accommodating all types of ontological traditions. Bahá’í ontology may be called **relativistic**, and it begins with the affirmation about the irreducible nature of multiplicity—everything in creation exists in its own right and on its own level (**pluralism**). There is no absolute non-existence in the world since, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it, ‘absolute non-existence lacks the capacity to attain existence. If the universe were pure nothingness, existence could not have been realized’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 47: 3). The lower forms of life, however, cannot comprehend the higher ones, and, in comparison to them, lack existence. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: ‘For example, as this mineral belongs to the mineral

kingdom, however far it may rise, it can never comprehend the power of growth. The plants and trees, however far they may progress, cannot imagine the powers of sight or of the other senses. The animal cannot imagine the human degree, that is, the spiritual powers.’ Hence, as He concludes, no creature is ever capable of understanding the existence of God since ‘differences of degree are a barrier to knowledge: The inferior degree cannot comprehend the superior. How then can a reality which is originated comprehend that Reality which has existed from all eternity?’ (59: 6). That is why in comparison to the Almighty, no part of creation could really claim true existence (**monism**).

According to the Bahá’í teachings, God represents the sum of all perfections. He is the uncaused cause of everything that exists and, as such, is essentially unknowable. Humans cannot comprehend Divinity, but they could deduce its existence from the guidance of scriptures, observation of nature, and study of human history. The Bahá’í Writings provide an abundance of traditional and rational arguments for the existence of God, most of which are comparable to the famous ‘Five Ways’ of St. Thomas Aquinas (Terry 2019).

Since God is pre-existent and eternal, His creation, although having its ultimate cause in the Deity itself, should also be infinite and ever existing. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the relation between God and His creation as that of emanation: ‘Appearance through emanation is like the appearance of the rays from the sun: The sanctified Essence of the Sun of Truth cannot be divided or descend into the condition of the creation. In the same way, the sun does not divide itself or descend upon the earth, but its rays—the outpourings of its grace—emanate from it and illumine the dark bodies’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 53: 3). He continues: ‘The first thing to emanate from God is that universal reality which the ancient philosophers termed the “First Intellect” and which the people of Bahá call the “Primal Will”’ (5). God does not generate the world from His nature. He creates it through His Will. As a result, the creaturely realm becomes essentially different from its Creator.

As for the world of creation itself, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá divides it into two categories—matter and spirit (**dualism**). Material objects constitute a reality we call nature, ‘which outwardly is the source of the life and death, or, in other words, of the composition and decomposition, of all things’ (1: 1). According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, ‘This nature is subject to a sound organization, to inviolable laws, to a perfect order, and to a consummate design, from which it never departs. To such an extent is this true that...all things—from the smallest invisible atom to the largest globes...—are most perfectly organized, be it with regard to their order, their composition, their outward form, or their motion’ (1: 2).

The spiritual realm, in its turn, is subdivided into five classes—the vegetative, animal, and human spirit, the spirit of faith, and the Holy Spirit. The vegetable spirit, which has the power of growth, and the animal spirit, which has the power of the senses, result ‘from the combination of elements that are brought together in a single composition [but a]fter the separation and dissolution of these composed elements, [those spirits with their powers] will also naturally cease to exist’ (36: 2). In contrast to them, the human spirit is eternal and continues its existence after the death of the body. But, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes, ‘this human spirit has two aspects: one divine and one satanic—that is, it is capable of both the greatest perfection and the greatest deficiency. Should it acquire virtues, it is the noblest of all things; and should it acquire vices, it becomes the most vile’ (36: 5). Finally, ‘the heavenly spirit, which is the spirit of faith and the outpouring grace of the All-Merciful’ is completed by ‘the Holy Spirit, which is the mediator between God and His creation’ (36: 6–7).

Philosophical anthropology

In the history of religious philosophy, it is usually asserted that human beings possess both a physical body and an eternal soul (for elaboration, see the chapter by Ian Kluge on Human Nature). In addition, various thinkers have argued that humans are by nature good (the ‘four beginnings’ of Mencius), evil

(‘Original Sin’ of St. Augustine), both good and evil (the ‘yetzer tov’ and the ‘yetzer ra’ of the Jewish rabbis), neither good nor evil (the ‘blank slate’ of John Locke). The Bahá’í teachings offer a complex depiction of human nature by accommodating all of those approaches. They distinguish between its perfect divine origin and foundation, susceptibility to evil with reference to inherited and material aspects, and neutrality when it comes to personal choices and education.

Like most religious philosophers, founders of the Bahá’í Faith affirm that human beings were formed with a material and spiritual element in them. Humanity stands at the threshold—it represents both the culmination of material creation and the beginning of spiritual perfections. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: ‘Man has two aspects: the physical, which is subject to nature, and the merciful or divine, which is connected with God.’ He continues: ‘If the physical or natural disposition in him should overcome the heavenly and merciful, he is, then, the most degraded of animal beings; and if the divine and spiritual should triumph over the human and natural, he is, verily, an angel’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 840).

Furthermore, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá distinguishes ‘the innate character, the inherited character, and the acquired character.’ The innate character contains different abilities and predispositions we are endowed with from our birth. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out that ‘although the innate nature bestowed by God upon man is purely good, yet that character differs among men according to the degrees they occupy’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 57: 2–3). The inherited character represents the ‘strength and weakness of man’s constitution’ that is transmitted to us from our father and mother—‘if the parents are of weak constitution, then the children will be likewise, and if they are strong, then the children will also be robust’ (57: 5). And the acquired character is formed by personal habits, training and education and, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes, the ‘differences of character arising from education, they are great indeed, for education exerts an enormous influence’ (57: 8).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá specifically addresses two biblical themes that deal with the inherited character—God’s promise to Abraham about His posterity, and Adam and Eve’s fall and expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The first one gave rise to a belief that all prophets will be direct descendants of Abraham, and that was a special favor of God to the pioneer of monotheism. The second one was transformed in Christianity into a doctrine of the Original Sin that humanity inherits from the first couple.

In His talks ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms the first and rejects the second theory. About Abraham and His posterity He says that ‘certain families and lineages have been singled out for a special blessing. Thus the descendants of Abraham received the special blessing that all the Prophets of the House of Israel were raised up from among their ranks.’ He adds that ‘Muhammad; the Báb [also] belong to that lineage [and] Bahá’u’lláh too is a lineal descendant of Abraham, for Abraham had other sons besides Ishmael and Isaac who in those days emigrated to the regions of Persia and Afghanistan’ (57: 6).

As for the doctrine of the Original Sin, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá contends that it ‘is irrational and clearly mistaken, for it implies that all men, even the Prophets and Messengers of God, through no fault or sin of their own, and for no other reason than their descent from Adam, became guilty sinners and suffered the torments of hell until the day of Christ’s sacrifice’ (29: 9). He proposes a different, symbolic interpretation of the story of Adam and Eve, in which Adam stands ‘for the cause of material life, and since the material world of man is the realm of imperfections, and since imperfection is tantamount to death, Paul compared the former to the latter’ (29: 8). In contrast to Adam, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá clarifies, ‘the reality of Christ, that is, the Word of God, is the cause of his spiritual life...meaning that all the imperfections imposed by the material life of man are, through the instruction and guidance of that Essence of detachment, transmuted into human perfections’ (29: 7). And that is the true meaning of the phrase: ‘For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive’ (1 Cor. 15: 22).

The Bahá'í Writings also offer a distinctive philosophy of mind by distinguishing the human body, mind, and spirit from each other. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one and the same thing.' 'As for the mind,' He points out, 'it is the power of the human spirit. The spirit is as the lamp, and the mind as the light that shines from it...The mind is the perfection of the spirit and a necessary attribute thereof, even as the rays of the sun are an essential requirement of the sun itself' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 55: 5–6).

The mind, which is associated with the brain, serves as an interface between the soul and the physical body. When the body deteriorates, the powers of the human mind weaken but the soul as the source of those powers remains intact and is not affected by material conditions. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it: 'Some think that the body is the substance and exists by itself, and that the spirit is accidental and depends upon the substance of the body, although, on the contrary, the rational soul is the substance, and the body depends upon it. If the accident—that is to say, the body—be destroyed, the substance, the spirit, remains' (66: 2). After the death of the physical body, the human spirit continues its evolution on the spiritual planes of existence. In His talks and public addresses 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides a great number of proofs for the immortality of the soul, both traditional and rational. He rejects the Indian notion of reincarnation and the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection and argues for the purely spiritual immortality of the human soul.

Philosophy of religion

Prophetology is, perhaps, the most important part of any scriptural philosophy because it aims to explain the special status of scriptural texts in a given religion. The main question of prophetology is how can

revelation or other forms of communication between the Creator and His creation be possible? There are three most common answers to this question by the faithful.

Buddhists focus on the human aspect of the founder of their religion, the Buddha—a natural but extraordinary human being who was able to achieve spiritual enlightenment. Muslims emphasize the intermediary role of the Prophet Muhammad between Allah and His people. Christians assert the divinity of Jesus Christ as the perfect mediator between God and humanity.

Here, as elsewhere, the Bahá'í Writings aim at reconciling those three approaches by shedding a new light on the subject. According to the Bahá'í teachings the founders of great and independent religions, or Manifestations of God as Bahá'ís call Them, have three stations—the 'first is the material station; the second is the human station, which is that of the rational soul; and the third is that of divine manifestation and heavenly splendor ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 38: 1). As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains: 'the material station...has an origin in time, for it is composed of the elements, and every composition must ultimately be decomposed' (38: 2). In this sense, the Prophets are like all other human beings.

'Abdu'l-Bahá continues: 'The second station is that of the rational soul, which is the human reality. This also has a beginning, and the Manifestations of God share it in common with all humanity' (38: 3). Their souls, however, are unique in that they are capable of reflecting the revelation from God. While the souls of most human beings emanate from the Holy Spirit, the souls of the chosen ones appear through the process of manifestation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the 'manifestational procession [as] the manifestation of the reality of a thing in other forms, like the procession of this tree or this flower from their seeds, for it is the seed itself that has become manifested in the form of the branches, leaves, and flowers' (54: 3). In that sense, the divine Manifestations are perfect mediators between the Creator and His creatures.

Finally, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes: ‘The third station is that of divine manifestation and heavenly splendour, which is the Word of God, the everlasting Grace, and the Holy Spirit. This station has neither beginning nor end’ (38: 4), and in that sense the Manifestation could be likened to God Himself. While Manifestations of God vary in their physical bodies and individual souls, they are one and the same in regard to their divine missions, differing only ‘in the intensity of their revelation, and the comparative potency of their light’ (Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 117). Divine educators teach the same spiritual truths but the social aspects of the religions they initiate vary depending upon the target audience. Also, after many centuries, misinterpretations of their teachings accumulate, to the extent that religions that shared the same origin and message may become contradictory and take positions opposite to each other.

Despite those contradictions and seeming incompatibility, Bahá’ís believe in ‘progressive revelation’—the view that the Manifestations of God and the religions they founded form a coherent and comprehensive plan that leads humanity to deeper levels of unity, love, and spiritual discovery. The Bahá’í Faith is unique among world religions in ascribing the status of divine Manifestations to such prominent religious figures as Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Krishna, Jesus, Mohammad, and their own twin prophets—the Bab and Bahá'u'lláh.

The Manifestations of God, while not being identical with God Himself, are the revealers of God’s Will and as such are beyond any ordinances and prohibitions. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, the Manifestations ‘encompass all created things...transcend and discover all existing realities...are cognizant of all things [and, therefore,] Their knowledge is divine and not acquired’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 40: 6). It follows that the Manifestations of God are endowed with essential infallibility, guarded from error and ‘whatsoever proceeds from Them is identical with the truth and conformable to reality [for] They are not under the shadow of the former religion’ (45: 5).

Philosophy of history

Various cultures espouse diverse views on natural and human history but, philosophically speaking, those approaches are reduced to two basic ideas—those of a cycle and a straight line. Most ancient cultures regard time—and human history, which evolves in time—as cyclical. The ring or a snake eating its own tail serve as a symbol of such understanding of history that has neither beginning nor end but only the ‘eternal return.’

The Bible, which also comes down to us from antiquity, introduces an entirely different perspective on the evolution of the world and humanity. It posits the ‘alpha point’ or the beginning of creation *ex nihilo* and describes humanity as moving irreversibly to the ‘omega point’ of the Last Judgment or the Apocalypse. The biblical idea of history as a straight line was inherited by modern secular culture, which replaced the Apocalypse with various utopian visions and became driven by the notion of linear progress with its optimistic slogan: the latest—the greatest.

The Bahá’í teachings accommodate both cyclical and linear approaches to human history but move significantly beyond this dichotomy and present a more complex and nuanced picture of it. To begin with, Bahá’ís believe in the divine origin and driving force behind human evolution, which is striving towards a certain goal that is preordained by God and is present potentially even before the appearance of human species on the earthly globe.

According to the Bahá’í views about Darwin’s theory of evolution, it is true only in regard to the material constitution of humanity, which shares common ancestry with all living creatures. As for the spiritual essence of humans i.e. their eternal soul, it is fundamentally different from the spirit that animates the animal kingdom. No matter how far the animal may evolve, spiritually it can never produce a new—human—species. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá puts it: ‘Just as man progresses, evolves, and is transformed from one form and appearance to another in the womb of the mother, while remaining from the

beginning a human embryo, so too has man remained a distinct essence—that is, the human species—from the beginning of his formation in the matrix of the world, and has passed gradually from form to form’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 49: 8).

The difference between evolution and history is that the former follows the inner laws of nature while the latter is driven by the outside forces of revelation. In the proper sense of the term, history is the result of the interaction between the Divine call and the human response. According to the Bahá’í teachings, human history is cyclical and depends on the appearances of Divine Manifestations. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: ‘Each of the Manifestations of God has...a cycle wherein His religion and His law are in full force and effect. When His cycle is ended through the advent of a new Manifestation, a new cycle begins. Thus, cycles are inaugurated, concluded, and renewed, until a universal cycle is completed’ (41: 4). What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls a ‘universal cycle,’ may run for thousands or even millions of years, and it ‘comprises...countless ages and epochs.’ As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes: ‘We are in the cycle which began with Adam and whose universal Manifestation is Bahá’u’lláh’ (41: 5).

The Bahá’í concept of a cycle, however, does not presuppose the return to what has been before, namely, to its starting point. Since creation is never-ending, so is spiritual progress, and each cycle is moving humanity forward and upward to new heights and accomplishments. Hence, the overall Bahá’í vision of history could be seen as fourfold. Human history is divine in origin, it has a purpose, it consists of upward spiral cycles, and it will last forever.

Bahá’ís view the present historical period as the age of transition during which humanity is moving from the stage of societal infancy towards its collective maturity. It is characterized by the unceasing struggle between what Shoghi Effendi identified as the forces of integration and the forces of disintegration:

A two-fold process... can be distinguished, each tending, in its own way and with an accelerated momentum, to bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet. The first is essentially an integrating process, while the second is fundamentally disruptive. The former, as it steadily evolves, unfolds a System which may well serve as a pattern for that world polity towards which a strangely-disordered world is continually advancing; while the latter, as its disintegrating influence deepens, tends to tear down, with increasing violence, the antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity's progress towards its destined goal (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 170).

Political philosophy

The philosophy of politics examines various types of governments and asserts which ones are the most effective and humane ways to organize society. The founding figures of the Bahá'í Faith in their writings unequivocally stand on the side of constitutional government and the rule of law. In many of His tablets Bahá'u'lláh denounces tyranny and absolutism while approving of consultative assemblies that give voice in state affairs to the people. In His Epistle to Queen Victoria Bahá'u'lláh commends the queen for having 'entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people...for thereby the foundations of the edifice of [her] affairs will be strengthened, and the hearts of all that are beneath [her] shadow, whether high or low, will be tranquillized' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Summons*, 31). In another tablet He writes: 'Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof. If the sagacious combine the two forms into one, great will be their reward in the presence of God' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 383).

Bahá'u'lláh instructs His followers to obey their kings and governments. He writes: 'In every country where any of this people reside, they must behave towards the government of that country with loyalty, honesty and truthfulness' (380). Bahá'ís are encouraged to participate in public affairs and, especially, to promote their social causes such as racial and gender equality, interreligious dialogue, economic justice, and so on. They are advised to vote their conscience but are not allowed to be members of any political party, in order to avoid the conflict and contention that are embedded in contemporary democratic political systems. When speaking about the differing domains of religion and politics, 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that while the 'Ministers of State should be enlightened by religion,' the teachers of faith 'should not invade the realm of politics [but instead] should concern themselves with the spiritual education of the people...trying to serve God and human kind' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, 158–59).

In the future, Bahá'ís envision the establishment of the 'Lesser Peace'—a global commonwealth of nations where international conflicts and wars would be prevented by an international and independent Supreme Tribunal. According to Bahá'u'lláh's plan, to form such an organization

the national assemblies of each country and nation—that is to say parliaments—should elect two or three persons who are the choicest men of that nation, and are well informed concerning international laws and the relations between governments and aware of the essential needs of the world of humanity of this day. The number of these representatives should be in proportion to the number of inhabitants of that country. The election of these souls who are chosen by the national assembly, that is, the parliament, must be confirmed by the upper house, the congress and the cabinet and also by the president or monarch so these persons may be the elected ones of all the nation and the government. From among these people the members of the Supreme Tribunal will be elected, and all mankind will thus have a share therein, for every one of these

delegates is fully representative of his nation. When the Supreme Tribunal gives a ruling on any international question, either unanimously or by majority-rule, there will no longer be any pretext for the plaintiff or ground of objection for the defendant. In case any of the governments or nations in the execution of the irrefutable decision of the Supreme Tribunal, be negligent or dilatory, the rest of the nations will rise up against it, because all the governments and nations of the world are the supporters of this Supreme Tribunal ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, no. 227).

Bahá'ís also believe that in the process of spiritualization humanity will eventually achieve the Most Great Peace when the Bahá'í supreme governing body, the Universal House of Justice, will exercise political power. In the 'Glad Tidings' Bahá'u'lláh writes: 'All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 383). In the 'Tablet of the World' He also says: 'According to the fundamental laws which We have formerly revealed in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and other Tablets, all affairs are committed to the care of just kings and presidents and of the Trustees of the House of Justice' (419). However, the exact degree of correlation between secular and religious authorities in the future is not clearly spelled out in the Bahá'í Writings and is open to interpretation and change.

Ethics and social philosophy

Ethics is a philosophical discipline that investigates the moral principles that guide human behaviour. Bahá'í ethics, like any other religious ethical system, claims to have a divine origin and foundation. It is also a virtue ethics, that is, the accumulation of virtues or perfections represents the highest moral aspiration for the believers.

The notion of human virtues is closely connected with the ideas of evil and free will. The Bahá'í Writings assert the reality of human free will in the moral sphere: '...all the doings of man are sustained

by the power of divine assistance, but the choice of good or evil belongs to him alone' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 70: 7). At the same time, they deny the substantiality of evil, whose existence is relative and simply represents the absence of good—like the shadow is the absence of light. Everything in creation is good within its own degree but may become evil in relation to others. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá puts it, 'scorpions and snakes are evil, but only in relation to us and not to themselves, for their venom is their weapon and their sting their means of defence. But as the constituent elements of their venom are incompatible with those of our bodies...the venom is evil, or rather, those elements are evil in relation to each other, while in their own reality they are both good (74: 5).

Likewise, human nature, which is twofold and includes both spiritual and material elements, is good by itself but is fraught with evil because of the opposition between spirit and matter. Our physical body, which is good and perfect on the material plane of existence and whose center is self-interest, becomes evil in relation to our soul, which reflects spiritual perfections and whose operation is driven by selflessness. Hence, our egoism or selfishness represents the inherent 'evil' inside us whose symbolic names are a legion—Satan, devil, serpent, beast, dragon, and so on. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, 'the evil spirit, Satan or whatever is interpreted as evil, refers to the lower nature in man' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 294).

As a system of moral norms and guidelines, ethics involves two dimensions—personal and societal. On a personal level, Bahá'í scriptures affirm the belief in God as the source of moral virtues: 'Know thou for a certainty that whoso disbelieveth in God is neither trustworthy nor truthful...Nothing whatever can deter such a man from evil, nothing can hinder him from betraying his neighbor, nothing can induce him to walk uprightly' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 232–33). Bahá'u'lláh instructs people to practice moderation and develop a good character, which 'is, verily, the best mantle for men from God' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Writings*, 387). He admonishes His followers 'to fix [their] gaze under all conditions upon

justice and fairness’ (387) and praises trustworthiness as ‘the greatest portal leading unto the tranquillity and security of the people’ (388).

Every religion has a key term that is exclusively associated with its core teachings. In Christianity it is the notion of universal love; in Buddhism—that of no-self or selflessness. The central concept of the Bahá’í Faith is the idea of unity or oneness. Bahá’ís distinguish three levels of unity—the unity of God, the unity of religion, and the unity of humanity. According to Bahá’í views, our Creator is one, and the purpose of religion, which is also essentially one but progressing, is to bring people together. Primal religions unified families and clans into tribes. National religions of Judaism and Hinduism united tribes into nations. International religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam provided to their followers a spiritual identity that transcended the ethnic, national, or regional borders. It has come a time, Bahá’u’lláh says, when humanity has to be integrated on a global scale.

The social dimension of Bahá’í ethical teachings, therefore, is unique and of primary importance for the believers. It includes the eleven principles that aim at guiding humanity toward planetary unity. As announced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (*Paris Talks*, 129–33), those principles are as follows: (1) independent search for truth; (2) unity of humankind; (3) religion should be the source of love and affection; (4) the unity of science and religion; (5) elimination of prejudices of religion, race, and sect; (6) equal opportunity of the means of existence; (7) equality of all before the law; (8) the establishment of universal peace; (9) non-interference of religion and politics; (10) equality of men and women; (11) progress by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Among the newly emerging areas of Bahá’í social discourse, which is part of what the Universal House of Justice referred to as ‘the notion of an evolving conceptual framework’, is the focus on a cluster of interdependent concepts of power, governance, freedom and authority with the purpose to

reorient humanity from the ‘culture of contest’ and adversarial relations to a mutualistic and cooperative social milieu (Karlberg).

Aesthetics

Aesthetics is the philosophical discipline that is devoted to the study of beauty and its expression and application in the arts. The Bahá'í teachings regard arts and sciences at high esteem, ‘but such [arts and] sciences as are useful and would redound to the progress and advancement of the people’ (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, 26). Of all the arts, Bahá'u'lláh—one of whose names is the ‘Blessed Beauty’—especially distinguishes music. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (38) He says: ‘We have made it lawful for you to listen to music and singing. Take heed, however, lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity...We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion’.

In His talks ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also stresses the importance and value of music: ‘The art of music is divine and effective. It is the food of the soul and spirit. Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted.’ He instructs His audience that music should be taught in every school: ‘It is incumbent upon each child to know something of music, for without knowledge of this art the melodies of instrument and voice cannot be rightly enjoyed. Likewise, it is necessary that the schools teach it in order that the souls and hearts of the pupils may become vivified and exhilarated and their lives be brightened with enjoyment’ (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, 52).

Conclusion

The Bahá'í Faith is a modern religion that confirms the spiritual origin and legitimacy of the world’s major faiths, including some forms of Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity,

Islam. At the same time, it offers a systematic philosophical outlook that is deeply rooted in biblical monotheism and represents a unique blend of Western and Eastern spirituality. Having incorporated a technical philosophical vocabulary into its scriptural texts, the Bahá'í teachings possess high potential for developing innovative philosophical theology in the future.

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