The Philosophy of Spirituality; a Bahá'í Viewpoint.
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A fundamental question of human existence is whether there exists a metaphysical reality, that is, whether there are forces and entities whose existence is independent of and beyond observable, material reality. A negative answer to this question yields a basically materialistic view of life and of human nature, holding in particular that individual life ends with physical death. From such a viewpoint, there can be no transcendental purpose to human existence; humans are just conscious animals who can do no better than try to get through their brief earthly lives with as much pleasure and comfort, and as little pain and suffering, as possible.

Of course, belief in the existence of nonmaterial forces or entities does not in itself lead to a transmaterial view of human purpose. For example, it can lead to superstition and occultism. But, belief in a metaphysical reality is an essential component of any transcendental view of human existence. In particular, all of the major religious systems of history have taught that there is a nonobservable spiritual reality above and beyond material reality, that this spiritual dimension of existence is more fundamental and more real than the material, and that the basic task of human existence lies in learning how to relate properly to spiritual reality. Any philosophy having this basic constellation of beliefs may be said to constitute a *spiritual* philosophy (or conception) of human existence. Achieving and maintaining the proper relationship with spiritual reality is what constitutes *spirituality.*

An important component of spiritual philosophy is the notion that spirituality is not the naturally given condition of the human being, but must be achieved as a result of a developmental process. In other words, we are not created in a state of spiritual perfection, but rather with the potential for achieving spirituality. Without this potential, spirituality would be an impossible ideal rather than a realistically achievable goal. The process of achieving spirituality is called *spiritual development* or *spiritual growth*.

In a certain sense, we could say that the human being is not, in his naturally given state, whole or complete. Spiritual development is thus a process of completion, a discipline of self-definition. It is the basic purpose of human existence because only through this process does the individual acquire or develop what is essential and universal, rather than merely accidental and local, within the range of human potentiality. We define what we truly are by becoming what we can most truly be. The process is often described as one of "salvation", of being lifted above the condition of unregeneration (or spiritual death) to the plane of a superior reality.

Even though the distinction between material and spiritual conceptions of life is the most fundamental, there can be quite significant differences among spiritual conceptions themselves. First of all, there can be significantly divergent views concerning the nature of spiritual reality. On the one hand, a *theistic* conception considers that the ultimate reality is a God who is ontologically superior to humans. In this view, spirituality consists ultimately in submitting one's will to God's, for it is God as Creator who determines what constitutes the proper relationship with spiritual reality.

On the other hand, a non-theistic conception considers that man is the ontologically highest form of existence. In this case, the ultimate spiritual reality lies within man himself

in the form of his soul or spirit, and spirituality is ultimately determined by human choice alone. This might be called an *existentialist* conception of spirituality. Thus, in the theistic conception, spirituality is a predetermined configuration or process, embedded in the very structure of existence ("essence precedes existence"), whereas in the existentialist conception, spirituality is whatever man makes of it by use of his free will ("existence precedes essence").

A theistic conception of spirituality is determined primarily by its view of human nature and human potential and, secondarily but importantly, by its view of the nature of God. (The point is that significant differences in theological conceptions can coexist with fundamentally identical conceptions of human nature and of spirituality.) Theistic conceptions of spirituality thus differ primarily with regard to their respective views of human nature, and, secondarily, with regard to their views of the nature of God.

In a general way, a theistic conception of spirituality sees the process of spiritual growth as one in which the individual must develop, through discipline, the proper use of the fundamental human capacities of mind, heart and will. One must learn to act in a proper way (ethical behavior), to feel in a proper way (love and humility), and to think in a proper way (the true knowledge of spiritual reality). Here, the "proper" use of one's faculties means their "God-intended use", God's intention being expressed, among other things, in the very structure of reality and of human nature.

We must also develop and expand our uniquely human consciousness (or self-awareness) to include an authentic, conscious communion not only with other humans but also with God Himself. Consciousness may be said to represent a primary intuition of being itself, and communion with God thus represents a primary intuition of the Being of God. Communion with God leads to an expansion of consciousness, i.e., to the *meta-awareness* of our human spiritual potential (instead of just an awareness of the self's current state of development).

In a theistic conception of human life and purpose, ethical norms are derived from and depend upon the concept of spirituality: Whatever contributes to spiritual development is good and whatever hinders or prevents it is bad. Spiritual development can thus be viewed as a double process of actualizing the good and of defeating or overcoming evil.

A fundamental question is whether or not evil is inherent in the nature of man or only the result of the misuse of human freedom. If evil is held to be inherent in man, then it follows that we must overcome, suppress, or eliminate some part of ourselves in order to achieve spirituality. Depending on what one considers the evil part of human nature to be, this conception of spirituality can be very destructive both to self and to others.

For example, it has frequently been held that what is evil in man is precisely the physical or material aspect of his nature. The underlying logic of this view would appear to be that the physical is shared with animals and other lower forms of life, whereas the purely spiritual or metaphysical is what is properly and specifically human, representing the Divine within us.

However, physical reality is just as surely the creation of God as is spiritual reality. The wholesale malefication of material reality thus engenders the problem of explaining why a presumably all-knowing, all-powerful, all-beneficent, and all-loving God would have done such a thing. Why would He have deliberately made part of His creation intrinsically evil and thus inimical to the spiritual growth process that is the very purpose of His creation

of humanity? After all, if He is capable of creating the purely spiritual, He could have just as well made us purely spiritual and therefore purely good in the first place.

A particularly acute form of this contradiction obtains when, as frequently happens, it is the human sexual impulse that is considered inherently evil. Of course, no one doubts that ignorant misuse, promiscuous indulgence and willful exploitation of the sexual impulse can and do engender serious personal and social destruction. But this understanding is quite different from the view which culpabilizes the sexual impulse itself. In this latter view, the very God-given impulse that engenders life, procreates the race and helps forge the essential link between husband and wife — the couple forming the basis of the family, which is the spiritual, emotional, and physical matrix of human life – is evil and thereby inimitable to the spiritual growth of man. Since attainment to spirituality involves overcoming evil, it follows from this view that spiritualization necessarily implies the suppression and eradication of the sexual impulse from one's nature. The Augustinian doctrine of original sin, as adopted by the major denominations of Christianity, is an historical example of a doctrine that enshrines such views. It considers that humans are "conceived in sin" and that evil is an intrinsic part of human nature.

In opposition to this *malefic* view of human nature and of material reality is the *eucratic* conception that evil is not inherent in (physical or spiritual) creation (and thus not in human nature) but results from man's misuse of his free will. In this view, evil has no objective existence and does not have to be overcome through suppression of any part of one's essential nature. The process of choosing the good – of learning the proper use of the will – is in itself the process of overcoming evil. When properly disciplined and channeled, the physical capacities and impulses of one's nature are helpful to the spiritual growth process.

Another fundamental question regarding the spiritual growth process concerns the degree of human participation. On one hand is the view that spiritual salvation is a unidirectional gift from God to humanity in which the only role played by humans is that of accepting or rejecting the gift. In such a view, an extremely sharp distinction is made between the "saved", who have accepted the gift of salvation, and the unsaved, who have not. Certain strains of Christian theology articulate this *passive* view of human participation in the spiritualization process. Among them is the well-known Calvinist view that salvation is totally "elective", i.e. predetermined by God for each individual.

On the other hand there are views that consider the spiritualization process to be primarily the result of individual effort, but based on the individual's perception of God-given principles underlying the process. Such an *active* view of human participation in the spiritual growth process is still within the framework of the theistic conception that sees God as the initiator of the process and the One who establishes its parameters and rules and who actively helps and assists the individual in his pursuit of spirituality.

Indeed, according to the active view of spirituality, it is to give us the opportunity to participate, to the fullest possible extent, in the process of our own becoming that God has subjected humanity to the tests and trials of life in the material world (in this initial stage of the eternal spiritual journey). The active viewpoint tends to see human nature as laden with virtually unlimited potential for self-actualization, whereas the passive view tends rather to see man as corrupt (the malefic view of human nature) or extremely limited in his potential for good.

Closely related to the distinction between active and passive is the distinction between *dynamic* and *static* conceptions of spirituality. Passive conceptions, with their sharp boundaries between the saved and the unsaved tend to give rise to static conceptions in which spirituality is viewed as an absolute stasis that is achieved once and for all time. Active conceptions tend rather to engender dynamic models of spirituality in which spiritual development is seen as an ongoing process (both before and after physical death). The dynamic model is more in keeping with the idea that man eternally approaches, but never reaches, absolute perfection.

Yet another dimension of spirituality is the relationship between the individual and society. Some conceptions of spirituality hold that spiritual development is a process that takes place only within the individual and concerns only his or her inner life. These *individualistic* conceptions of spirituality often hold that the external world of everyday practical concerns is at best irrelevant, and at worse a substantial hindrance, to the attainment of spirituality. They focus on such universal disciplines as prayer and meditation, but also frequently involve elements of monasticism, asceticism, self-mortification and other extreme forms of material self-denial and social withdrawal.

Opposite to these individualist conceptions are certain *collectivist* views. The hallmark of collectivism is the notion that society – the collectivity – has moral value but that the individual apart from society has relatively little value. In this view, spirituality is to be achieved primarily through the proper socialization of the individual, who is seen as having very little potential for autonomous, self-responsible personal transformation or growth. The individual is seen rather as the product of social forces over which he or she has very little control. There is a certain compatibility between collectivist and passive conceptions of spirituality.

Intermediate between individualism and collectivism is what might be called an *interactive* view of spirituality. The interactive conception holds that the individual does have value independently of the collectivity, and that spirituality involves a high degree of individual autonomy and responsibility. At the same time, the collectivity is held to have a moral or spiritual value that exceeds the sum of individual values, because the integrity of social structures has a moral influence on the collectivity (and thus individuals) that transcends purely personal influence. From an interactive perspective, spiritualization involves both a change of individual consciousness and the erection of social structures that are favorable to cooperation and mutuality rather than competition and conflict.

Finally, we can judge spiritual conceptions according to criteria of objectivity vs. subjectivity. *Subjectivism* holds that, although material reality may be ruled by rational, lawful cause-and-effect relationships, spiritual reality is not. According to the subjective view, material reality is ruled by laws only because material reality is without consciousness, but a conscious, willing reality such as man cannot be constrained by exact relationships of cause and effect.

The *objective* conception holds that spiritual reality is governed by lawful relationships just as surely as is material reality, although the principles governing spiritual reality may not necessarily be the same as those governing material reality. Thus, spiritual laws must be learned and understood rationally and not just experienced subjectively. This does not mean that spiritual reality can be totally described in purely rational terms any more than material reality can be so described. It only asserts the essentially Platonic notion

that the structure of spiritual reality is independent of whatever our temporary perceptions of it may be.

Objective conceptions allow for a complete reconciliation of science and religion, but subjective conceptions tend to see science and spiritual development as sharply differentiated and perhaps even partially contradictory. Many non-theistic (existentialist) conceptions of spirituality have significant subjectivist elements, but so do some theistic ones as well.

The Bahá'í Concept of Spirituality.

The Bahá'í Faith, founded by the Prophet Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892), articulates a concept of human nature and human purpose that is spiritual, theistic, eucratic, active, dynamic, interactive and objective. The Bahá'í Faith teaches that the seat or locus of the human personality is each individual's soul or spirit. The soul is a noncomposite, nonphysical, eternally enduring entity that comes into existence as a result of a special creative act of God at the moment of physical conception (thus God, not physical conception, is the cause of the soul's existence). Each individual soul is endowed with intrinsic capacities (called the spiritual capacities of the person). The full development of these capacities is the purpose, not only of human existence, but in fact of the whole of creation.

Indeed, the human being, with his unique, immortal soul, is the highest form of creation. The other (lower) forms of creation serve primarily to create an immense training ground for the development of human spirituality, which continues in other dimensions of existence after the death of the physical body. Not only the individual but also the collective life of humankind should be based on spiritual principles, i.e., those which foster the development of spiritual capacities:

Having created the world and all the liveth and moveth therein, He [God], through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him – a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation. . . . Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, for so enduring a bounty.[1]

The doctrine that all human beings, and only human beings, are endowed with this innate capacity for spiritual development and communion with God is called by Bahá'u'lláh the Oneness of Humankind. It is the pivotal principle of the Bahá'í teachings.

Essential to the Bahá'í concept of spirituality is the Bahá'í notion of progressive revelation, which holds that religion is, in essence, a unitary phenomenon, that God has periodically sent certain specially designated individuals to serve as His Prophets or Manifestations. These figures are none other than the founders of the great religious systems of history, for example, Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad and, in the nineteenth century, Bahá'u'lláh. These teachers are endowed by God with a superhuman knowledge of the realities of existence (including the reality of human nature). By articulating progressively their understanding of the fundamental structure of reality, the Manifestations of God enable humanity to gain an ever more adequate grasp of the objective laws governing spiritual reality and the sometimes subtle principles underlying

the spiritual growth process itself. The body of truths about spirituality articulated by the Manifestations is called revelation.

Thus, from the Bahá'í viewpoint, there are two sources of valid knowledge about spirituality available to humanity: the revelations of the Manifestations, embodied in the sacred writings of the world's great religions, and the practical and systematic (scientific) knowledge of the principles of reality that results from our human experience and our reflections about this experience. The combination of these two God-ordained sources of spiritual understanding provides us (if we but use them) with all the tools necessary to prosecute successfully (though not always painlessly) the spiritual growth process and, thereby, to fulfill the purpose of our existence.

The Crucial Role of Philosophy.

From the Bahá'í viewpoint, the role of philosophy in the process of human spiritual growth and development is fundamental. Only philosophy can provide a truly universal language that allows us to understand and correlate the knowledge gained by religion on one hand and science on the other. The lack of such a universal, culturally neutral language has already had a disastrous effect on the modern world.

The lack of such a language in religion has had the effect of fostering the process by which highly specific cultural prejudices have become mixed with the essentially universal teachings of religion. This has engendered fundamentalism, in which literal interpretation of powerful spiritual analogies has in many instances led to the evacuation of the universal philosophical content of religion. Fundamentalism has, in turn, engendered dogmatism and fanaticism where we witness the spectacle of professed believers in a religion of love who give putative religious justification for murder, torture, rape and even systematic genocide.

The discipline of philosophy fosters the intellectual and moral autonomy of believers of any religion. It thereby serves as a bulwark against manipulative (often politically inspired) attempts to use religion and the power of human belief for immoral, antisocial and inhumanitarian ends.

The lack of an adequate philosophical language has also had an extremely negative influence on science. Indeed, during the greater part of the twentieth century, successful scientific practice has become irrationally linked to a dogmatic philosophical materialism, giving rise to various popular, but philosophically inadequate, notions such as operationalism, behaviorism and positivism. In particular, the refusal of many practicing scientists to give serious attention to fundamental philosophical and metaphysical questions has undoubtedly retarded the development of science itself as well as creating an intellectual milieu in which immoral and antisocial uses of science and technology are more easily accepted both by the public and by intellectuals.

The Bahá'í Faith addresses this fundamental issue with its principle of the unity of religion and science:

> Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! 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.[2]

It is only philosophy that can develop the concepts and the tools necessary for an adequate articulation of this complementary relationship between science and religion.[3]

Thus, there is no doubt that the Bahá'í Faith gives great importance to the development and teaching of philosophy as outlined in the "Appeal for Philosophy." Concepts and ideas that are truly profound and universal can, when properly articulated, exert a powerful influence in the world. The Bahá'í World Community therefore not only supports the appeal but also stands ready to contribute in any way it reasonably can to this undertaking.

References

1. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.* Translated by Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939. 2nd rev. ed. 1976, p. 65.

2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, London, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969. 11th ed., p. 143.

3. For an example of work on this problem from a Bahá'í perspective, see William Hatcher, <u>Logic and Logos,</u> Oxford, George Ronald, 1990.