

HAROLD ROSEN

*Human Nature and World Religion: Toward a
Bahá'í-inspired Philosophical Anthropology*

Harold Rosen (www.interfaitheducation.org) is a lifelong student and teacher of religion and philosophy, now serving as a community inter-faith educator in the Vancouver, BC area, and has master's degrees in religion, philosophy and education. He is adjunct professor for continuing studies at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University. He is also the author of several books, including *Founders of Faith: The Parallel Lives of God's Messengers*.

Introduction: Inspiring voices echoing across the ages

How do the major religions depict human nature? A coherent and composite picture of our human station emerges from a sympathetic study of four representative scriptural traditions – the Buddhist faith, the Christian faith, the Islamic faith and the Baha'í faith. In these religious worldviews, human beings are situated dramatically between the natural and spiritual realms – higher than earth, but lower than heaven. We are given a privileged place with unique capacities and a range of choices. In this essay, four levels of reality are briefly described – the natural, the human, the spiritual and the divine – using key quotes from four sets of scriptures. A consistent religious metaphysic is presented using these sources.

Some insights from the Western intellectual tradition – including classical Greek thought and Renaissance humanism, philosophical anthropology and virtue theory – complement and enrich this composite view of human nature. Key points from Plato, Aristotle, Marsilio Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, Max Scheler, and H. B. Danesh are especially relevant to the present study. Themes of creative freedom, civilization-building and self-transcendence emerge from a study of these fields and figures, offering positive alternatives to the prevailing secular and materialistic concepts of human nature. In this Bahá'í-inspired perspective, the primary human capacities of loving, knowing and willing are accented; and Bahá'í teachings are shown to integrate and enhance a wide range of scriptural and philosophical sources, with powerful implications for change in many fields of study and action.

Several lofty views of human nature have resounded through the centuries and millennia, inspiring confidence in those who contemplate their beautiful and oracular imagery. About 3000 years ago, David's Psalm 8 depicted human beings with a profoundly dignified role in the cosmos:

When I look at Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou has established; what is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that Thou dost care for him? Yet Thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet. . . .¹

This expresses deep wonder at our human station in the creation as a whole, marveling at our lofty responsibilities and our extensive powers.

In 1486, Pico della Mirandola's "The Dignity of Man" offered a powerful portrayal of human capacity and privilege, establishing a theme for the European Renaissance. God is presented as saying to humanity:

O Adam . . . you may have and possess . . . whatever place, whatever form, and whatever functions you shall desire . . . You who are confined by no limits, shall determine for yourself your own nature, in accordance with your own free will . . . I have set you at the center of the world, so that from there, you may more easily survey whatever is in the world. We have made you... the moulder and maker of yourself.²

Again, human freedom, capacity and responsibility are intensely evoked in this famous passage.

In about the year 1600, Shakespeare described human beings as the "paragon of animals". The term "paragon" was drawn from Italian and Greek roots, meaning "whetstone for sharpening," a model or pattern of excellence, the perfection of its kind, peerless example, or touchstone of comparison. Shakespeare summarized the God-given capacities of human beings in a seemingly oracular utterance. "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculties! in form and moving, how express and admirable! in action, how like an angel! in apprehension, how like a god! the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" (3 –

1. Psalm 8, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Revised Standard Version)*, editors H. G. May and B. M. Metzger (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973).

2. *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, editors J. B. Ross and M. M. McLaughlin (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), p. 478.

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2)³ Yet again, the creative endowment of humanity is placed before us in exalted and memorable language.

The Bahá'í Faith claims a revelation that serves as an “eye to past ages,” enabling humanity to integrate many religious and philosophical views, as well as to discern their common Source. “As the human race in all its diversity is a single species, so the intervention by which God cultivates the qualities of mind and heart latent in that species is a single process.”⁴ This statement points to the underlying oneness of the various conceptions of God, humanity and religion. This essay attempts to identify some of these conceptions of unity, which are specifically focused on human nature, and to integrate them with related theoretical fields and disciplines, hopefully serving as a contribution to a Bahá'í-inspired philosophical anthropology.

Philosophical anthropology and its religious themes

Though human nature had been an important theme for classical Greek and foundational Christian thinkers, and had received attention by such modern thinkers as Kant and Hegel, it became an independent discipline in Western philosophy in the 1920s. Max Scheler and Helmut Plessner are considered the founders of modern philosophical anthropology. Its primary focus has been with these questions: What is human nature? What are the most essential qualities of human beings? What are our most characteristic capacities and limitations? What are the primary self-images of humanity? What is our place in the nature of things? And it is with this latter question, along with its religious aspects, that this essay is most concerned.

This field has generally depicted man as capable of surpassing natural limits, but also as self-defeating and mysterious. We are seen as a choosing creature, both within and above nature, both individual and social, and both creative and destructive. Since we are able to forge our destiny to a degree, we are not fully amenable to scientific investigation. The primary “works” of man – including consciousness, language, religion, art, science, technology, commerce and governance – are interpreted as arising from our nature. Five general concepts of human nature have been identified but interpreted as inconsistent, calling for intellectual reconciliation in a higher synthesis or a breakthrough to a new and more adequate conception: 1) the Judeo-Christian view that we are sinful and graced beings; 2) the Greek and Enlightenment view that we

3. *The Works of William Shakespeare (Complete)*, William Shakespeare (Roslyn, NY: Black's Readers Service, 1972), p. 1141.

4. *One Common Faith*, The Universal House of Justice (Thornhill, Ontario: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 2005), p. 23.

are rational beings; 3) the modern scientific view that we are highly developed animals; 4) the pessimistic view that we are at an evolutionary dead-end, having wasted our potential and become dissolute; and 5) the optimistic view that we are self-transcending beings with great potential in the areas of power, creativity and love.

Modern Western religious thinkers such as Kierkegaard, Buber and Brunner have accented the theological and faith-related dimensions of the human condition. Created in the image of God, we are viewed as spiritual beings longing to serve and become closer to God. We can be loving and just on one hand, with divine guidance and inspiration; but we can also misuse our freedom and sink into sin and destruction. From the religious perspective, human nature is best understood from the inside, and is illumined with revelation – which is best understood with the ‘logic of the heart’ transcending that of the mind. The maturing of humanity is understood as growing toward God through humble acceptance of our creatureliness, combined with strengthening of conscience as well as decisive and loving action. In the religious view, love is usually understood as a value hierarchy, progressing from physical to social to divine. Faith is the condition of the whole person rooted in God. Human life is essentially a creative struggle in the context of body and soul, freedom and necessity, temporality and eternity. To this theological portrayal of human nature, the Bahá'í faith adds the affirmation that ultimate fulfillment is offered to humanity by all the Divine Revealers.

Four levels of reality: A common metaphysic for locating our place in the grand scheme

An exciting and hopeful discovery can be made through a sympathetic study of world religions. It appears that all major scriptural traditions offer a similar map of ultimate reality. In very comparable ways they proclaim the same basic metaphysical ‘big picture’ with four distinguishable levels. We will attempt to illustrate this metaphysical commonality with a brief look at the way Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and Bahá'í scriptures depict four levels of reality. Because sincere multi-scriptural study is rare, and because the key terms for each faith tradition arise from different cultural and historical settings, this deeply significant truth about humanity's common philosophical ground is not often glimpsed. Among the benefits of a study like this is the invitation to see and appreciate the unified reality to which most of the scriptural symbols and parables point.

According to the world's scriptures collectively, our human condition is described as being both in and above the material world. Below us and around us is the realm of nature and matter, in which we can discover

three major sub-levels: elements, plants and animals. We have reasoning, discerning souls capable of directing themselves in both material and spiritual directions. We have a privileged and dignified place in the grand scheme of things. Above us in a higher realm is the revelatory world of the Spirit or Word, made accessible to us by the foundational Revealers, Messengers and Enlightened Ones. And above these revered figures is a realm that even they cannot penetrate – God or the Infinite Divine Realm. This coherent metaphysic provides the context for elaborate teachings on the proper development of the human soul.

Some of the key terms for the Divine or Ultimate Reality in the collective body of world scriptures include: God, the Creator, the Unborn Transcendent Power, the Absolute and Un-manifest, and the Eternal Mystery. Some of the key terms for the spiritual or revelatory realm include: the Holy Spirit, the Creative Word, the Dharma or Truth, and the Revealers or Founders. This realm is generally believed to be “inhabited” by variously conceived celestial beings, angels and archangels. Some of the key terms for the human realm include: the soul, the mind, the heart, the spirit, as well as the domain of choice, self-observation, virtues and aspirations on one hand, and vices and temptations on the other. And some of the key terms for natural reality include: the physical creation, the material world, containing elemental bodies (with their powers of attraction and integration), plants (with their powers of adaptation and growth), and animals (with their powers of sensation and mobility). In sum, four interacting but distinguishable levels of reality are presented in the world religions, with human beings placed dramatically between the natural and spiritual realms.

Divine or ultimate reality: Beyond all reach and comprehension, source of all power and goodness

How do our four representative faiths view God or the Highest Realm? The terms used seem to refer to the same One Source of all power and goodness, beyond direct access and comprehension, and so these terms may be regarded as functionally equivalent. It is true that in the Eastern religions, the preferred terms for Divine Reality are more impersonal and the images are more abstract than those preferred in the Western Religions. But if God is beyond our comprehension, this difference between impersonal and personal terms is not substantive, but rather a matter of cultural preference and psychological temperament.

In Buddhist scriptures the Ultimate or Transcendent Realm is referred to as the Unborn and the Unconditioned, the Formless Realm, and the Dharmakaya or Eternal Truth. “Because there is an Unborn, a not-

become, a not-made, a not-compounded Reality, therefore there is an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded.”⁵ And:

What is meant by the Eternally-Abiding Reality? The ancient road of Reality . . . has been here all the time, like gold or silver preserved in the mine. The Dharmadatu (Absolute Truth) abides forever . . . (like the) Reason of all things. Reality forever abides, Reality keeps its order, like the roads in an ancient city.⁶

Or: “The Absolute is unlimited and unceasing.”⁷ This Absolute and Eternally-Abiding Reality is clearly an impersonal concept of God.

In Christian scriptures the Highest Realm is called God the Father, the Creator, He Who is and was and is to be, the Alpha and Omega or the Beginning and End. “There is . . . one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”⁸ “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist.”⁹ “I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”¹⁰ For Christians, God is referred to in these passages in terms that are both personal and impersonal.

In Islamic scriptures the Highest Power is referred to as Allah, the one and only God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, the Eternal and Absolute, the Incomprehensible and Unseen Reality. “No vision can grasp Him, but His grasp is over all vision: He is above all comprehension, yet is acquainted with all things.”¹¹ “He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent: and He has full knowledge of all things.”¹² “God is He, than Whom there is no other god – the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Source of Peace. . . . Whatever is in the heavens and on earth doth declare His praises and Gory.”¹³ Muslims – like Jews, Christians and Bahá'ís – refer to God in both personal and impersonal terms.

In Bahá'í scriptures God is termed the Creator of all worlds and realms of being, the Unknowable Essence, the Central Orb of the Universe, the

5. Udana 80, quoted in *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, ed. by Andrew Wilson *et al.* (New York: Paragon House), p. 48.

6. Lankavatara Sutra 61, quoted in *World Scripture*, p. 102.

7. Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala 5, quoted in *World Scripture*, p. 466.

8. Ephesians 4.6, *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

9. 1st Corinthians 8.6, *ibid.*

10. Revelation 1.8, *ibid.*

11. *Qur'an* 6.103, trans. by Abdullah Yusuf Ali (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc, 2001).

12. *Qur'an* 57.3.

13. *Qur'an* 59.23-24.

Ancient Being and the Fathomless Mystery. “Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God.”¹⁴ As exalted as the Manifestations of God are deemed to be, there are aspects of Divine Reality that are unknown and inaccessible even to them. “The way is barred and to seek it is impiety.”¹⁵ And:

Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is, and hath ever been, veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly hidden from the sight of men.¹⁶

These passages depict God as to some degree discernible in every part of creation, but most essentially above and beyond all things visible and invisible.

Spiritual or revelatory reality: Intermediary between creator and created, revelatory guidance and eternal life

How do our four representative faiths view the spiritual or revelatory level of reality? Again, it is apparent that the major world religions offer comparable teachings about the level of reality below God and above humanity. The Revealers, Prophets and Founders are believed to have originated in an eternal realm. Though the Spiritual and Revelatory level contains sub-levels and beings that are differently named in the various scriptural traditions, the sublime realities to which these terms point appear to be the same. Together these realities traverse much of the distance between the ultimately unknowable Creator and the created order. They serve an intermediary function between God and human beings, and they are the direct source of the revelatory guidance and written scriptures that have been delivered to humanity periodically.

Buddhist scriptures speak of the Realm of Form, the Dharma or Spiritual Path, as well as past, present and future Buddhas assisted by a variety of celestial beings that have attained the desire-less and un-describable realm of Nirvana. The Realm of Form (Rupadhatu) is described as heavens occupied by celestial beings, higher states of awareness and exalted meditative states.¹⁷ The Buddha represents the

14. Bahá'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2005), section 93.1.

15. Bahá'u'llah, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1991), p. 37.

16. *Gleanings* 19.1.

17. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1st ed., Mircea Eliade, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

Wisdom and Compassion of this realm. “He who sees the Dharma sees me; and he who sees me sees the Dharma.”¹⁸ “The Tathagata (Path-Maker or Way-Shower) is the victor unvanquished, the absolute seer, the perfectly self-controlled one.”¹⁹ “The Buddha will not die; the Buddha will continue to live in the holy body of the law.”²⁰ The “holy body of the law” and the Word of God appear to be identical.

Christian scriptures refer to the Word of God, the Logos, Holy Spirit, Christ the Son of God, and the kingdom of heaven not of this world. The people who seek to grow closer to God should heed “every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.”²¹ Christ explained that his words did not come from him alone, but God. “What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has bidden me.”²² He also declared, “My kingship is not of this world.”²³ The author of Hebrews wrote that through the Son, God “created the world. He reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power.”²⁴ The terms Spirit, Word and Wisdom in the Jewish and Christian scriptures refer to the power and guidance of the heavenly kingdom, and they appear to be equivalent to the Eastern term Dharma.

Islamic scriptures are revered as the Source of Bounty and Grace, the Mother of the Book, the Word of God, and the realm from which the Divine Messengers are sent to humanity. Those who are obedient to the *Qur'an* are believed to be following “a Revelation from the Lord of the worlds.”²⁵ Such Holy Books are said to come to humanity at intervals: “for each period is a Book (revealed).”²⁶ Acceptance of the Messenger is understood as following the will of God. “He who obeys the Messenger, obeys God.”²⁷ God sends Prophets and Messengers because human beings easily forget and regress to superstition. “It is He that hath sent His Messenger with Guidance and the Religion of Truth, to proclaim it over all religion.”²⁸ For Muslims the spiritual or revelatory Realm is the Source of the Book, and appears to be equivalent to the Word, the Law and the Truth (or Dharma) as understood by Hindus and Buddhists.

18. Samyutta Nikaya 3.120, quoted in *World Scripture*, p. 465.

19. Digha Nikaya 3.135, quoted in *The God of Buddha*, J. M. Fozdar (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1973), p. 26.

20. Digha Nikaya 1.46, quoted in *The God of Buddha*, p. 23.

21. Matthew 4.4, *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

22. John 12.50, *ibid*.

23. John 18.36, *ibid*.

24. Hebrews 1.3, *ibid*.

25. *Qur'an* 56.80.

26. *Qur'an* 13.38.

27. *Qur'an* 4.80.

28. *Qur'an* 9.33.

Bahá'í scriptures affirm that divine attributes are perfectly reflected by the Manifestations of God – including Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and Baha'u'llah – in ways that human beings cannot fully grasp. The spiritual realm is the Source of the Word of God, as well as the heavenly realms, some of which can be attained by the human soul in its never-ending spiritual progress. In Bahá'í Writings the revelatory realm is described as having three sub-levels: 1) *Malakut* – the order of souls completely free and detached from bodily existence, the companions of the light who dwell in the Concourse on High; at this level the Manifestations of God are said to be “distinct”; 2) *Jabarut* – the higher order of Exalted Beings or Eternal Spiritual Guides in which the revealed God acts and makes commands; at this level the Manifestations are said to be “united or one”; and 3) *Lahut* – the names and attributes of Divine Consciousness, the Tongue of Grandeur, also called the Word, the Logos, the Holy Spirit or the Primal Will.²⁹ The Manifestations traverse the levels of the spiritual realm, but also exemplify the human realm during their historic missions on earth. They have a “dual-station” and can be described as both human and beyond-human, both in the world and above the world, both historically distinct and united in divine purpose. These teachings add significant details to the previous revelations, and they cast light on the pattern of progressive revelation in the world's religious history.

Natural reality: The world of time/space, form/energy, change/struggle, life/death

How do our four representative faiths view the natural order? The major scriptural traditions claim that humanity is called to a position above nature, but we can slip backward into its lower domain, depending on the moral and spiritual quality of our choices. Nature itself is a world of time and space, bodily form and physical energy, struggle and development, causal determination, life and death. Traces of the Creator can be found in the created realm, and we are to discern these evidences and make good use of them.

Buddhist scriptures refer to the transient Realm of Desire, “myriads of things,” “causal actions,” as well as the realm of “impermanent processes.” The Realm of Desire consists of elements, plants, animals and unenlightened human beings. All physical realities are impermanent and transitory processes, but ordered by causal relations. “The world exists because of causal actions; all things are produced by causal actions and all beings are governed and bound by causal actions. They are fixed like

29. Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'llah: Baghdad 1853-63*, vol. 1 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980), pp. 55-60.

the rolling wheel of a cart, fixed by the pin of its axle.”³⁰ Impermanent and transitory are all phenomenal realities.³¹ “As the bee takes the essence of a flower and flies away without destroying its beauty and perfume, so let the sage wander in this life.”³² Wisdom requires respectful use of nature.

Christian scriptures speak of the “world of flesh” as full of material temptations, but nature is also viewed as Providence, the “handiwork” and the “footstool” of God. Divine power is evident in things made visible. “Ever since the creation of the world (God’s) invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, have been clearly perceived in the things that have been made.”³³ “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it . . . have dominion over . . . every living thing that moves upon the earth.”³⁴ Dominion is the moral quality of good stewardship, rather than the license to dominate arbitrarily as sometimes interpreted. Each creature is ultimately dependent on God for its life and growth.

Islamic scriptures mention frequently the created and providential order, and “signs for those who discern.” The natural world is described as designed in detail by God, with limitations assigned to each creature. “In the creation of the heavens and the earth . . . in the beasts of all kinds . . . are Signs for a people that are wise.”³⁵ “It is God Who causeth the seed-grain and the date-stone to split and sprout.”³⁶ “And among His Signs is this, that heaven and earth stand by His Command; then when He calls you, by a single call, ye (straightway) come forth.”³⁷ For the early Muslims who pondered their scriptures, there was considerable encouragement for the development of the sciences.

Bahá'í scriptures describe the physical creation in some detail as interdependent and evolutionary, as well as subject to frailty and limitation. The material world can be a temptation to unproductive attachment, but it is also the means of all progress. Nature is a system of interconnections among the mineral, plant, animal and human kingdoms. “All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees. The organization of God is one; the evolution of existence is one, the divine

30. Sutta Nipata 654, quoted in *World Scripture*, p. 102.

31. John Powers, *A Concise Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oneworld Books, 2000), article on Anitya, p. 21.

32. Dhammapada 49, trans. by Juan Mascaro (London: Penguin Books, 1973).

33. Romans 1.20, *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

34. Genesis 1.38, *ibid*.

35. *Qur'an* 2.164.

36. *Qur'an* 6.95, *ibid*.

37. *Qur'an* 30.25, *ibid*.

system is one.”³⁸ “Every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance, nor any slackening whatever.”³⁹ “Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation.”⁴⁰

Human reality: Between heaven and earth, spirit and nature; both in and above, creative and destructive

Now we come to the central theme of this essay: how our four representative faiths have depicted human nature. According to the collective body of world scriptures, “the human being is a microcosm of the universe, having the essences of all things in him- or herself. As the microcosm, human beings have the foundation to know, use and enjoy all things. Of all creatures, humans have the widest scope of thought and action, encompassing all things, knowing and appreciating all things, guiding and prospering all things, and transcending all things.”⁴¹ We occupy a privileged place between heaven and earth, poised for moral and spiritual progress. But we have the choice to embellish and grow beyond the world of nature, and to join the Creator in the building of a better world, or, on the other hand, to regress to an animal-like condition, to be obstructive to the processes of advancement, and destructive of the divine bounty offered to us.

Specifically as regards human relations with the natural world: “The religions give a two-fold teaching, for the human being is both a part of nature, and yet qualitatively distinct as the highest and central entity in nature. . . . The scriptures teach, in various ways, that the human being is the crown of creation.” Our dominion over nature “means to contribute to and enhance the harmony and beauty of the natural world. When human beings are at one with Absolute Reality, they emit a luster and a spiritual fragrance that perfects their environment.”⁴²

Prophecies of humanity’s moral and spiritual maturation abound in the world’s scriptures, and they paint an inspiring picture of harmony between the natural, human and spiritual realms. The Buddhist image of the Pure Land is described as a coming era that will be prosperous, delightful, filled with many beautiful gardens and spiritually advanced souls. Humanity will be unified in thought and aspiration, raising their

38. Abdul-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. by Laura Clifford Barney (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2004), p. 198.

39. Abdul-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdul-Baha*, Universal House of Justice and Marzieh Gail (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2010), section 137.2.

40. Bahá'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1988), p. 26.

41. *World Scripture*, p. 212.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

hearts to their Lord with resolve and serene faith.⁴³ In the Christian prophecy of the 'new heaven and new earth', the sea will disappear as nations befriend one another and all travel becomes free of fear. "All things will be made new" as all learning is shared and all obstacles to advancement are removed. The glory of God will be the light by which the nations walk.⁴⁴ Islamic prophecies envision a "second creation" and a Day of Renewal, when the world will be filled with justice, the roads will be completely safe, and the earth will show forth its bounties in splendor.⁴⁵ Bahá'í scriptures declare that the Cycle of Fulfillment has begun. "This is the Day in which God's most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things."⁴⁶

On our central theme of human nature itself, Buddhist scriptures refer to an inner agent of awareness and effort, to the limitless depths of our human endowment, and to the seat of mindfulness by which moral and spiritual progress can be made. "We say that the Essence of Mind is great because it embraces all things, since all things are within our nature."⁴⁷ We are also described as prone to selfishness and attachment, which is the most basic cause of our suffering. But the Third Noble Truth declares that suffering can be overcome through intentional practices. "Guard well your mind. Uplift yourself from your lower self, even as an elephant draws himself out of a muddy swamp."⁴⁸ "Even as rain breaks not through a well-thatched house, passions break not through a well-guarded mind."⁴⁹ "Let no man endanger his duty (to the Path of Truth), the good of his soul, for the good of another (choice), however great. When he has seen the good of his soul, let him follow it with earnestness."⁵⁰

Christian scriptures refer to the human spirit as "made in the image of God" and capable of reflecting the heavenly virtues. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."⁵¹ But we are also creatures of choice and bodily limitation, capable of sin. "I see in my (bodily) members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin

43. Sukhavativyuha, summarized from *Buddhist Scriptures*, ed. by Edward Conze (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1959), pp. 232-36.

44. Revelation 21, *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

45. *Qur'an* 21.104, and *Kitab al-Irshad*, quoted in Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishing, 1999), p. 253.

46. *Gleanings* 4.1.

47. Sutra of Hui Neng 2, quoted in *World Scripture*, p. 212.

48. Dhammapada 327.

49. Dhammapada 14, *ibid*.

50. Dhammapada 166, *ibid*.

51. Galatians 5.23, *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

which dwells in my members.”⁵² The choice between higher aspiration and lower temptation is always ours. “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit.”⁵³ We are called to contribute to the creation, using our unique gifts fruitfully. “Having gifts that differ according the grace given to us, let us use them.”⁵⁴

Islamic scriptures also accent the privileged condition of the human soul or heart, gifted with special divine favor, but also having a tendency to forget our obligations to God, making our selves the center of all things. “Do ye not see that God has . . . made His bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, (both) seen and unseen?”⁵⁵ “It is He Who hath made thee (His) agents, inheritors of the earth: He hath raised you in ranks, some above the others: that He may try you in the gifts He hath given you.”⁵⁶ Though we are all children of God, we have been created diverse in languages, colors, tribes and nations, as a challenge to our growth and development. Often we squander this endowment and fail these tests. “The (human) soul is certainly prone to evil, unless my Lord do bestow His Mercy.”⁵⁷ “We test you by evil and by good, by way of trial.”⁵⁸

Bahá'í scriptures develop an elaborate set of teachings on the human spirit as a “luminous reality” selected “out of all created things for this supernal grace . . .” and able “to encompass all things, to understand their inmost essence, and to disclose their mysteries.” We are able to “hear the hidden truths that are written and embedded into the heart of all that is.”⁵⁹ “Man – the true man – is soul, not body.”⁶⁰ “Upon the reality of man . . . (God) hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things, man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so great a bounty.”⁶¹ The main purpose of individual human existence is to know and love God, and to develop our divinely-given virtues. Our collective purpose is to co-fashion an ever-advancing civilization, implementing the guidance of the most recent Manifestation, Bahá'u'llah.

52. Romans 7.23, *ibid.*

53. Romans 8.5, *ibid.*

54. Romans 12.6, *ibid.*

55. *Qur'an* 31.20.

56. *Qur'an* 6.165.

57. *Qur'an* 12.53.

58. *Qur'an* 21.35.

59. Abdul-Baha in *Bahá'í Prayers* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, IL, 1991), p. 103.

60. Abdul-Baha in *Paris Talks* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2006), section 28.6.

61. *Gleanings* 27.2.

The terms “soul,” “human reality,” “human spirit,” “rational faculty,” “mind” and “heart” are used somewhat interchangeably in Bahá'í scriptures. What endowments, capacities and responsibilities are pointed to with these key terms? God is said to have created each soul with its own individuality, having the divine image engraved upon it. It is the first of all created things to declare the glory of its Creator – to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration. It is a mystery that no mind can fully fathom. The soul lifts us above the rest of nature; it is a “heavenly gem” and a harbinger proclaiming the reality of all the worlds of God. “Consider carefully . . . these concepts, this knowledge, these technical procedures and philosophical systems, these sciences, arts, industries and inventions – all are emanations of the human mind.”⁶² The soul is our human essence, and God elevates it to ever-higher stations after casting off its earthly frame.

How is the relationship between the soul and the body explained in Bahá'í teaching? The body, including the brain, is viewed as a magnificent tool of the soul. The body is a set of highly evolved instruments to implement the volitional choices and purposes of the soul. “The lamp needs the light, but the light does not need the lamp. The spirit does not need a body, but the body needs spirit or it cannot live. The soul can live without the body, but the body without a soul dies.”⁶³ As a rational faculty, the soul initiates the motion or stillness of the body – including such functions as seeing, hearing and speaking – for better and for worse. The soul both receives messages from and directs the brain; and so the brain functions as a site of interaction between the soul/mind and the body. But the soul is also able to reflect the higher Spiritual or Revelatory realm. Therefore, the soul is intermediary between the body and the Spirit, just as the tree is intermediary between the seed and the fruit. In other words, Bahá'í teachings confirm the other major scriptures in viewing the soul as intermediary between “heaven and earth,” and between “Spirit and nature.” This description of the soul helps explain the human condition as both “in” and “above” the world.

There are in the world of humanity three degrees; those of the body, the soul and spirit . . . When man allows the spirit, through his soul, to enlighten his understanding, then does he contain all creation; because man, being the culmination of all that went before . . . contains all the lower world within himself. Illumined by the spirit through the instrumentality of the soul, man's radiant intelligence

62. Abdul-Baha in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1990), p. 2.

63. *Paris Talks* 28.15-16.

makes him the crowing-point of creation . . . If . . . the spiritual nature of the soul has been so strengthened that it holds the material side in subjection, then does the man approach the Divine; his humanity becomes so glorified that the virtues of the Celestial Assembly are manifested in him . . . he stimulates the spiritual progress of mankind.⁶⁴

The observation that human beings can waste their God-given potential and opportunity is characterized in a unique way in Bahá'í scriptures. It is as if very loving parents had provided their children with “a library of wonderful books,” but the children continually amuse themselves with “pebbles and playthings.” The parents long for their children’s “eternal glory,” but the children are content with “blindness and deprivation.”⁶⁵ Though we are born holy and pure, it is possible for human beings through their own negligence and poor choices to become increasingly defiled. Our moral-spiritual capacities and creative potential can only be manifested through volition. Instead of rising to higher levels of awareness and service, we can allow lower, degraded activities to monopolize our attention. But our life in this world is, in part, a preparation for the spiritual life after the death of our bodies, for “indispensable forces of divine existence must be potentially attained in this world.”⁶⁶

If we ask why it is necessary for the soul, which had its origin in God, to make an often-painful journey back to God, the Bahá'í scriptures answer that we are in need of divine education as we pass from degree to degree in our progressive spiritual unfolding.

Man must walk in many paths and be subjected to various processes in his evolution upward . . . He would not know the difference between young and old without experiencing the old . . . If there were no wrong, how would you recognize the right? If it were not for sin, how would you appreciate virtue? If sickness did not exist, how would you understand health? . . . Briefly, the journey of the soul is necessary. The pathway of life is the road, which leads to divine knowledge and attainment. Without training and guidance, the soul could never progress beyond the conditions of its lower nature, which is ignorant and defective.⁶⁷

64. *Paris Talks* 31.1-6, *ibid.*

65. Abdul-Baha in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, comp. by Howard McNutt (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2007), 222.

66. *Ibid.*, p. 226.

67. *Ibid.*, pp. 295-96.

Contrasting conditions of what we ordinarily consider “desirable” and “undesirable” are crucial aspects of our moral and spiritual progress in this life.

Insights from classical Greek and Renaissance thought

Having surveyed the place of human nature in the scriptures of representative world religions, and seeing how they offer a four-level metaphysic in which human beings occupy a privileged and responsible place, we now turn to complementary views in some of the greatest minds of Classical Greece and Renaissance Europe. Plato and Aristotle offer insights on the tripartite nature of the soul, while Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola offer universal and synthetic perspectives on the soul in the context of spiritual progress in the cosmic hierarchy. These views all seem to complement, integrate and develop the foundational teachings of revelatory systems.

Might we consider Plato (427-347 BCE) and Aristotle (384-322 BCE) the recipients of materials and teachings from a “primal revelation” passed on to them through ancient Egyptian, Hermetic, Zoroastrian, Hebrew, Pythagorean and Orphic sources – as believed by Ficino and Pico? This hypothesis seems consistent with Islamic and Bahá'í teachings about the one God Who manifested the transformative Word or Spirit, which in turn produced a diverse but unified creation, and revealed divine guidance to humanity at intervals from the very beginnings of our earthly history. It is also consistent with the methods of Plato and Aristotle in gathering knowledge and opinions from very wide-ranging sources. If these two seminal figures absorbed spiritual ideas and monotheistic wisdom from lands such as Egypt, Israel and Persia, this would help explain their high-minded critique of Greek polytheism and their utility for subsequent Jewish, Christian, Islamic and Baha'í thinkers. The hypothesis of a “primal revelation” is another way of saying that divine revelation has been progressive and offered to humanity in varying times and places, going back into the very distant and largely untraceable past.

Plato's views on the soul probably had roots in previous traditions and revelations, combined with fresh philosophical insight and imaginative metaphors. In “The Phaedrus” he offered his famous concept of the soul as like the activities and relations among a charioteer, a white horse and a black horse. The white horse represents the positive, spiritual aspiration of the soul, and is called a “lover of honor,” a “follower of glory” that is “heaven-bound,” manifesting the qualities of obedience to the charioteer, guided by his word and a “maker of sacred pledges.” On the other hand, the black horse is pleasure-seeking and physically desirous, very

disobedient to the charioteer, the “mate of insolence and pride,” while also opposing the white horse. The charioteer himself has the challenge of training the white horse and reining in the black horse simultaneously – determining the overall direction, waiting appropriately, reasoning, controlling the horses according to immediate conditions, and ultimately wishing to “live in the light” like the white horse.⁶⁸ The soul, then, for Plato, has structural agencies along with dynamic processes consisting of spirit, desire and reason. More than two millennia later, Freud interpreted these human functions as the superego, the id and the ego respectively.

Aristotle is often interpreted as inconsistent with Plato on almost every topic, but from the perspective of this essay, their differences have been exaggerated and their commonality is deep and readily apparent. Though Aristotle’s terminology is more scientifically and empirically oriented, and his temperament is less mystical and religious, his conclusions about the structure and processes of the soul are quite compatible. Aristotle, too, offers a tripartite description of the soul, in which Plato’s white horse is cast as the “theoretical intellect” contemplating the Highest Good; the black horse is cast as the natural functions of “sensation and nutrition” attending to bodily needs and preferences; and the charioteer is cast as the “practical intellect” making experience-based decisions that are compatible with knowledge and reason. For Plato and Aristotle, our primary human capacities manifest as three interacting functions of the soul: 1) spiritual aspiration, seeking reunion with the divine beloved, and contemplating the Highest Source of goodness and power; 2) bodily needs and material attachments, seeking physical satisfaction; and 3) practical learning and volitional control, seeking appropriate balance. A Bahá'í perspective on these three parts of the soul might emphasize their similarity to the primary capacities of spiritual “loving” aimed at unity; social and intellectual “learning” aimed at truth; and materially effective “willing” aimed at service to the world of humanity.

Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499) was, with Pico, among the most influential Renaissance thinkers. As an Italian translator and commenter on the complete works of Plato and Plotinus, he established a well-developed platonic theology of love and immortality, and integrated Plato with Christian thought more thoroughly than had Augustine (354-430). Ficino might be viewed as a pre-Reformation reformer who tried to offer a more spiritual, contemplative and deeply grounded faith than the hyper-rational and secular tendencies he saw developing in his day. He saw a divinely guided continuity from the distant ancients such as the “Thrice-

68. From Plato’s “The Phaedrus,” quoted and summarized in *Real Philosophy: An Anthology of the Universal Search for Meaning*, ed. by J. Needleman and J. Appelbaum (London: Arkana Penguin, 1990), pp. 24-28.

Great Hermes” (who was called Enoch in Jewish tradition, Thoth in Egyptian tradition, Houshang in Persian tradition, and Idris in Islamic tradition) to the culminating faith in Christ as the exemplar of divine love in action.

Ficino proposed a metaphysical hierarchy, which dramatized the central and unifying role of the human soul in creation. God is viewed as the highest level, below which is the angelic order, followed by the souls of humanity, who are above the qualitative level and the material order, which serves as the lowest level of the cosmic hierarchy. Above the soul are eternal, intelligible realms; below it are temporal and sensible realms. The soul, then, is drawn in two directions in its unifying activity – upward to the source of its being, downward to care for lower things. Yet all true experiences of love, no matter what the objects of this love may be, awaken us to the natural desire of the soul for union with God. All experiences of beauty and goodness are reflections, however faint or bright, of divine beauty and goodness. On this point, Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'llah spoke for God and revealed a related truth: “I created thee . . . engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty.”⁶⁹

Pico (1463-1494) was another Italian philosopher, theologian and mystic who not only attempted an integration of Plato and Aristotle, but an integration of Greek classicism and mythology with the “primal revelation” – as conveyed and developed in the traditions of Hermeticism, Zoroastrianism, Pythagoreanism, Orphism and Kabbalism – combined with Christian scholasticism and humanism, as well as Islamic philosophy, theology and mysticism. He quoted the author of the Hermetic literature as teaching: “A great miracle is man.”⁷⁰ This declaration was part of the “man as microcosm” philosophy that helped pave the way toward the Scientific Revolution of the sixteenth century. A parallel teaching of Bahá'u'llah was: “Man is the supreme Talisman . . . Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.”⁷¹ Pico's vision was an interdisciplinary and universal-minded synthesis of the major philosophical and religious sources known in his day. He used allegorical interpretation to reconcile diverse texts and belief systems, and viewed philosophy as preparatory to the higher fulfillment of religion.

In Pico's metaphysical system, he considered “unity” to be a higher station than “participatory being” – suggesting that all existing things

69. Baha'u'llah, “The Hidden Words,” Arabic section, Number 3 (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2002), p. 7.

70. Pico della Mirandola, quoted in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, p. 476.

71. *Gleanings* 122.1.

grow toward an ultimate dynamic oneness. However, his most influential and enduring teaching concerned the freedom and powers of the human station. We are created by God as appreciators of the magnitude and splendor of creation, and as the “moulder and maker” of ourselves, placed at the “center of creation” so that we may survey, have and become whatever we choose. This view calls attention to the depth of our moral responsibility, because “to whom much is given, of him will much be required.”⁷² Pico envisioned a regenerative peace that would reconcile all philosophies and religions of the world, and may have anticipated a revelation such as the Báha'í faith, which began in 1844 in Persia with the central theme of world unity.

Insights from Max Scheler's philosophical anthropology⁷³

Another figure offering very useful insights on human nature is Max Scheler (1874-1928), a German philosopher who is usually considered the founder of modern philosophical anthropology. Spiritual and religious themes played central roles in his system of thought. He viewed humans as valuing, loving, communal and aspiring beings, who in their essential nature are “beside,” “outside” or “beyond” the physical world. Scheler saw “values” as objective and essentially good qualities that can be directly perceived and conceived. Value development, however, was viewed as relative to individual and social experience. We feel our way toward more positive and higher values.

He identified five sets of value-ranks that were placed in a hierarchy; 1) the lowest order of values are sensual, ranging from pain to pleasure; 2) then come utilitarian or pragmatic values, ranging from useless to useful; 3) vital values, ranging from the common or base to the noble or lofty; 4) intellectual and spiritual values, seeking ever-higher forms of truth, beauty and justice; and 5) eternal or religious values, seeking ever-more exalted encounters of holiness. God was conceived as a Being of ultimate goodness and power, meant to fill our “mind-sphere” with faith; but an individual's mind-sphere may become filled with idols, pseudo-religions or nothingness. Mind was seen as a “tether” between human existence and the Absolute, and in some respects, we are co-creators with God.

Scheler considered the feeling and aspiring “heart” to be more essential to our human nature than our reasoning and willing functions. He called this view the “emotional a priori”: all values are feel-able phenomena that can be increasingly understood and appreciated as

72. Luke 12.48, *Oxford Annotated Bible*.

73. This section is drawn from *Max Scheler: A Concise Introduction to the World of a Great Thinker* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1965).

“good”. The goodness of an object is measured by how positive it is directly perceived to be, and how high it is on the value-hierarchy. An ethical choice is movement from less to more positive value, or from lower to higher value. True love is said to open our eyes to ever-higher values in the beloved. The act of love is a creative movement of the heart, bringing about and fostering ever-higher values in the beloved. Following Augustine, Scheler saw our key choices as ranging between forms of guided and misguided love. All of the positive values that he labeled “vital,” “intellectual,” “spiritual” and “religious” might be considered “virtues” in the traditional sense.

The social application of this perspective led Scheler to describe the dangers and evils of Nazism, Capitalism and Communism. He advocated “United States of Europe” and was a strong advocate of international universities and continuing studies programs available to all persons everywhere. The highest form of knowledge was said to be “knowledge for salvation” or moral-spiritual knowing in an ever widening “community of love.” Human beings are the reconcilers of the material and spiritual realms, and love of the Eternal Being is the highest form of love. These basic affirmations in Scheler’s philosophy seem generally consistent with how the scriptures of major religions depict human nature.

Insights from virtue theory: Praiseworthy qualities and cultivating beautiful character

Further insights about human nature can be gleaned from a brief review of modern ethical theory. Three major ethical systems vie with one another in the Western world – the ethics of Duty or right principle, the ethics of Utility or good result, and the ethics of Virtue or beautiful character. From the late eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, the Duty ethics of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) and the Utility ethics of John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) dominated most serious ethical discourse; but now a third approach has been recognized.

About five decades ago, the Virtue ethics of Aristotle was rediscovered, providing a needed alternative or supplement to the ethics of Duty and Utility. However, it becomes clear to any fair investigator of the major world religions that the moral standards found there can be properly understood as Virtue ethics. Therefore, the ancient and traditional guidance humanity has received over the ages emphasizes such ideals and virtues as: loving-kindness, devotion, gratitude, steadfastness, justice, mercy, humility, wisdom, honesty, respect, service, peace and unity. Such virtues are understood to be praiseworthy human qualities and God-given capacities of the human soul. They mirror spiritual powers of a higher world, requiring in this world ongoing nurture and education

over the lifespan of the individual, as well as revelatory renewal over the millennia for societies and their leading institutions. “It is religion . . . which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilization.”⁷⁴

Kantian ethics places the emphasis on duty, rational obligation and observing right principle. Its slogan might be formulated as “trust the mind,” as it entails making a rational analysis of the principles and rules relevant to the case at hand. The central principle of Duty ethics is: “Act only on maxims that can be universalized for all persons in similar circumstances.” We are enjoined to consider rational duty above personal and interpersonal consequences; and we are to ask: “What if everyone in similar circumstances were to do what I am about to do now?” This perspective has been associated with conservative temperaments and policies.

Utilitarian ethics places the emphasis on the interpersonal results of our actions and their social consequences. Its slogan might be “trust the senses,” as it entails an empirical investigation into the concrete benefits and injuries that are at stake. The central principle of Utility ethics is: “Act so as to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of persons involved.” We are to consider ultimate consequences more than formal obligations; and we are to ask: “How much positive effect and how much harm would result from the action I am currently planning?” This perspective has been associated with liberal temperaments and policies.

Plato and Aristotle spoke of four “cardinal virtues”: wisdom, courage, temperance and justice. Augustine and Aquinas added and elaborated upon the three “theological virtues”: love, faith and hope. But as stated above, Virtue ethics is the ancient and traditional form of moral guidance, placing emphasis on cultivating beautiful character in oneself and others. Its most well-known and foundational sources have been the founders of major world religions – Moses, Zoroaster, Krishna, Buddha, Christ, Muhammad and Baha'u'llah. Its slogan might be “trust the soul,” as it entails attuning to and respectfully observing the virtuous guidelines that have facilitated humanity’s character development down through the ages. The central principle of Virtue ethics is: “Act in ways that cultivate virtues in ourselves and others.” We are to consider the higher longings and aspirations of humanity as having much higher authority than rationally conceived duties and empirically derived benefits; and we are to ask: “What virtues call and command me, and what guidance is offered by traditional wisdom?” Though this perspective has been associated with

74. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 98.

both conservative and liberal temperaments and policies, it is more deeply grounded and universally applicable than the merely human attempts to justify our behavior morally.

Primary human capacities: Loving, knowing and willing

We now move toward the conclusion of our survey, using H. B. Danesh's contemporary Bahá'í-inspired account of human nature.⁷⁵ He identifies our three primary human capacities as: loving, knowing, and willing. These capacities sound intrinsically positive and valuable, but their quality depends upon the quality of their objects, and each of them can be mis-used. For example, our loving capacity can be directed to the glorification of war; our knowing capacity can be directed to the efficiency of crime; and our willing capacity can be directed to discrimination against a certain ethno-cultural group or religious community. The soul is like a mirror and can be faced toward both creative and destructive purposes.

Our "loving" capacity is variously termed emotion, feeling, affection, relating, caring, appreciating, aspiring and revering. As a God-given capacity it is meant to function as an active force of attention to beauty, growth and unity; and it can be the cause of closeness, intimacy and nurturance. Its main action is creating – bringing people, ideas and things together. Love affirms one's self-worth and forms friendships, creates families and rears children, feeds the hungry and shelters the homeless, removes strangeness and prejudice, fashions works of art and literature, and nurtures our own and others' spiritual growth. The ultimate purpose of our loving capacity is Unity-seeking.

Our "knowing" capacity is variously termed cognition, learning, wondering, thinking, reasoning, investigating and discerning. As a God-given capacity it is meant to function as consciousness and self-awareness, thinking and problem solving, symbol using and language, intuiting and imagining, as well as higher insight and inspiration. Its various means include experience and reflection, logic and other forms of reasoning, creative work and discovery, study and intellectual pursuit, research and scientific investigation, as well as meditation and prayerful problem solving. The ultimate purpose of our knowing capacity is Truth-seeking.

Our "willing" capacity is variously termed volition, choosing, deciding, committing, contributing, making and creating. As a God-given capacity it is meant to function as an agent of conscious choice and responsibility for our own and others' well-being. It sets our directions or

75. H. B. Danesh, *The Psychology of Spirituality: From Divided Self to Integrated Self* (Hong Kong: Juxta Publishing Ltd, 1997).

keeps us passive in the face of options. If a boat is likened to the body, then the captain may be likened to the soul in its willing capacity, and the wind and water represent the conditions in the world. Our willing capacity provides motivation, the courage to act and the wherewithal to be creative. This capacity accounts more for the diversity of worldviews than does our knowing capacity. The ultimate purpose of our willing capacity is Service-seeking.

From Danesh's perspective, what is called the "self" is the essence of one's being and an integration body, mind and soul. The self is our awareness that we exist now, have existed in the past, and will exist in the future. This experience is usually continuous and whole, for it includes feelings that link the body and the mind, as well as conscious and unconscious content. The self is the unique result of soul-body interface and interaction. But as social beings, the self must also be understood as our own being as perceived by others. The self, then, is a unifying concept.

[The human reality] is the same reality which is given different names, according to the different conditions wherein it becomes manifest. Because of its attachment to matter and the phenomenal world, when it governs the physical functions of the body, it is called the soul. When it manifests itself as the thinker, the comprehender, it is called the mind. And when it soars into the atmosphere of God, and it travels in the spiritual world, it becomes designated the spirit.⁷⁶

The self and soul then are unified, though their functions may be distinguished.

A significant observation regarding our three primary capacities is that a universal code of ethics seems to be derivable from the ideals toward which they strive: unity, truth and service. All religions and cultures might eventually agree that these aims could be used to co-fashion a coherent ethical basis for a global legal system. "Unity" is here understood not to mean "sameness" or "domination" by any single group or perspective, but rather, integrative oneness among diverse views, dynamic balance and interdependence among diverse groups, world-consciousness and compassion, mutual empowerment of all individuals, and universal justice and peace. Unity means that previous tendencies to uphold national sovereignties are gradually transcended. "Truth," in terms of its role in everyday life, means openness to investigation, consultative problem-solving, replacing ignorance with education and knowledge,

76. Abdul-Baha quoted *ibid.*, p. 39, citing "The Star in the West" 7.19 (March 1917), p. 190.

rooting out the sources of all prejudices, as well as equal receptivity to scientific research and revelatory guidance. “Service” is here understood as the highest expression of will, and suggests contributing to the well-being of others in ever wider circles. Service implies that self-centeredness has yielded to care for humanity, domination has yielded to more egalitarian participation, and competition has yielded to cooperation toward an ever-advancing global civilization.

In Bahá'í teachings, “spiritual growth” is a term more associated with individuals, whereas “spiritual evolution” has a collective connotation, referring more to humanity as whole. Our personal spiritual growth is a process of reflecting divine virtues ever more perfectly, and allowing spiritual radiance to illumine the soul ever more completely. Humanity's spiritual evolution comes in response to the series of Revealers or Manifestations of God, and will gradually lead to achieving on earth an ever more heavenly civilization.

Creative freedom, civilization-building, and self-transcendence: Positive alternatives to secular materialism

In this essay we have tried to discern and distill general truths about human nature from a survey of representative world religions as well as some influential thinkers in Western philosophy. We have sought useful insights from a fairly broad range of spiritual and intellectual views, attempting to see clearly the “forests” of wisdom about the soul, and not get lost in the “trees” of historical and theoretical details. From this perspective, three features of human nature stand out from the myriad of qualities described here and elsewhere in the related literature. Human beings, unlike other observable creatures, can be seen to exercise creative freedom, build complex social institutions, and undergo transformation toward higher levels of being. In other words, we have a pronounced degree of choice, we fashion lofty civilizations, and we consciously evolve in a moral and spiritual sense. Our fulfillment as human beings requires these activities. Yet these undeniably human capacities are ignored or curtailed by the prevailing worldview of secular materialism, which presupposes that we are primarily comfort-seeking, technologically adept animals, mechanically adapting to changing environments.

Most of the world's operative economic, political and educational systems – as they have developed from the sixteenth century onwards – presuppose that we are predominantly material and non-spiritual beings competing for limited resources. Though an analysis and critique of the secular and material worldview is beyond our present scope, we offer a few comments that emerge from within this survey. Among the powers of revelation and religion are the generating of new and higher civilizations.

When religious systems are in decline, when spiritual aspiration has become weak, when virtues diminish so that vices become prominent, and when institutional leadership becomes corrupt – then civilization as a whole declines as materialistic ideologies fill the spiritual void, and humanity drifts and sinks and desperately awaits a new revelation. The darkest periods of the twentieth century – two world wars, financial and environmental crises, humanitarian atrocities – show the results of filling the moral-spiritual void with arrogant and materialistic ideologies. Such is the general condition of humanity today – adrift in the absence of a consciously embraced and divinely guided global civilization – though we can identify universal sources of inspiration and wisdom because new light has come into our world.

As we have tried to show, foundational religious and philosophical sources teach that we can choose to develop our higher nature, which makes us creative contributors to the institutions of a growing or reformed civilization. We can devise social systems that empower us individually and collectively. We can seek ever-higher dimensions of the spiritual and revelatory realm. We are fashioned for self-transcendence and for making the earth ever more heavenly. We have arrived at the point where our evolution can become intentional – whether approached biologically, psychosocially or spiritually. We live in a developmental, evolutionary and progressive universe, as shown both by the sequential scriptures of major religions and the discoveries of modern science. This seems to be the summary testimony of the world religions, the wisest philosophical observers of our human condition, and the methods and contents of the sciences. This view provides hopeful alternatives to the prevailing but fated perspective of secular materialism.

Interpretive summary: Bahá'í teachings integrate many traditions on human nature

To conclude, we attempt to state explicitly the most important questions addressed in, and arising from, this essay – providing very brief and clear responses that seem consistent with a sympathetic study of world religions and Western thought, especially as guided and interpreted by Bahá'í teachings. By this means, the most significant and suggestive principles of this study might be lifted up for consideration. Responses to key questions are written in italics.

Can we discern a common metaphysic in the scriptures of major religions? *Yes: authoritative Buddhist, Christian, Islamic and Baha'i sources together paint a "big picture" of a four-leveled interactive and developmental universe – the Divine or Ultimate realm, the Spiritual or Revelatory realm, the human realm, and the natural realm. What place is*

assigned to human beings in the traditional religious worldview? *We are both in and above nature, poised for never-ending spiritual progress toward God.*

Are Greek Classical philosophy and Renaissance thought compatible with the way world religions depict human nature? *Yes: the greatest minds of ancient Greece and Renaissance Europe also depict the soul as occupying a privileged place in the cosmic hierarchy, linking the material and spiritual realms.* Are there any versions of modern philosophical anthropology, which complement both the religious worldview and traditional Western philosophy? *Yes: this is illustrated by Max Scheler's view that values have an objective pole, can be rank ordered, and that love and co-creativity are key descriptors of the human condition.* Is virtue ethics compatible with the traditional religious worldview, with Western classical thought, and with Scheler's philosophical anthropology? *Yes: virtue ethics have been taught by the major religious systems, and elaborated upon by Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Ficino, Pico and Scheler.*

Do we have an essential human nature, and if so, what is it? *Yes: we are spiritually developing beings.* Do we have the limitations of animal nature? *Yes, but we are endowed with higher capacities.* Is there an immortal or eternal dimension to our nature? *Yes: we begin in the physical world and grow beyond it.* Can we become one with and identical to God? *No, but we can make indefinite progress in likeness to God.* What is the purpose of human life as individuals? *To love and know God, and to develop our virtues.* Are there key virtues in the Bahá'í Revelation? *Unity, peace, justice, love, wisdom, truthfulness, service, and covenantal obedience.*

Can we be fulfilled by material means alone? *No, but material means are essential for all progress.* Which are the primary human capacities? *The loving heart, the learning mind, and the noble will.* What is the Bahá'í understanding of the loving heart? *We are to love all God's children as He loves us.* What is the Bahá'í understanding of the learning mind? *We are to discover higher truth and make continual progress.* What is the Bahá'í understanding of the noble will? *We are to align our will with God's will, and to serve humanity.* What is the Bahá'í concept of the self? *Integration of body, mind and soul, both conscious and unconscious.* Is the self tripartite in some respects, but ultimately one? *Yes: this is another instance of unity-in-diversity.* Must we grow and develop in order to fulfill our human nature? *Yes, as is the case with all parts of creation.* What is humanity's collective purpose? *To fashion together an ever-advancing global civilization.* Is a universal code of

ethics possible and desirable? *Yes: it will aim toward unity, truth and service.*

Are Bahá'í teachings on the soul compatible with all the previously mentioned perspectives and fields? *It certainly appears so, for their overall theme is dynamic unity of all faith traditions, peoples and reputable fields of study and action.* What are the core themes of these fields and the Baha'í faith as regards human nature? *Creative freedom, civilization-building and self-transcendence have been central themes and affirmations of world religions and philosophies of human nature.*

Do these themes provide a viable alternative to the prevailing worldview of secular materialism? *Yes, for they call us to re-fashion education, governance and commerce so as to foster the development of our higher moral-spiritual capacities.* Is there hope for humanity's future, and can we make of earth a heaven? *Yes: with our collective human effort and with God's guidance and grace.*

We close with guidance from Bahá'u'llah, touching on several themes we have addressed and clothing them in language both poetic and injunctive.

Be an ornament to the countenance of truth,
a crown to the brow of fidelity,
a pillar of the temple of righteousness,
a breath of life to the body of mankind,
an ensign of the hosts of justice,
a luminary above the horizon of virtue,
a dew upon the soil of the human heart,
an ark upon the ocean of knowledge,
a sun in the heaven of bounty,
a gem on the diadem of wisdom,
a shining light in the firmament of thy generation,
a fruit upon the tree of humility.⁷⁷

University of British Columbia (Canada)

77. *Gleanings* 130.1.