

Searching for the Scientific in the Spiritual *

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Almost 45 years ago, in the first lecture of Professor Werblowsky on the origin of religious experience, he spoke about the event in which Man became a human being, different from the animals. This event was, he said, when man stepped back and began to look upon the world which surrounds him as an object, to which he applied observation, investigation, judgment and decision. He began to experience nature not as a part of it, but as being inside it and outside it at the same time. This is the basis of for our existence as humans, this is the dividing line which enabled the development of man as a thinking creature. Because once Man made this one step backwards, and moved from the position of *subjectivation* to that of *objectivation* in his attitude to the world, he widened the scope of his observation not only to the nature outside him but also to himself. It was as if he stepped out of himself and regarded his own *self*, his “ I ” in the same way that he regarded any other natural object. He now applied to *himself* the mental judgment which he applied to the world of nature which impressed upon his feelings, and was opened to the experience of his senses, and to the investigation of his mind. The stepping backward, the acquirement of the position of an observer which I call “objectivation,” the ability to judge, to examine and come to a balanced decision, is probably what is meant in the Biblical story about Man eating from the fruit of the tree of knowledge .

How accurately and beautifully this process is described in the Biblical tradition! In the first stage of the awareness of the human of his surroundings, when the first step backwards was taken, he, or in this case she, Eve ,*observes* the tree .She becomes aware of its individual existence; she sees the tree with different eyes, as an object to be sensed and experienced. Had she been an animal she would have grabbed the first fruit and eaten it. But now, having acquired consciousness of the world around, she acts differently :

“And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food ,and it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her ;and he did eat.” (Gen. 3:6)

Please pay attention to the accurate growing of consciousness in the description - she first saw the obvious: “the tree was good for food.” This is the first, most basic urge of nature - food. In this man and animal are alike, but then comes the second stage, that of aesthetic judgment, one which belongs only to the humans - the tree “was pleasant to the eyes.” And

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finally, the high degree of human observation, the intellectual judgment that the tree was “to be desired to make one wise”!

However, all this belongs to the stage in which Man developed his ability to relate to his surroundings as objects; but this biblical story goes on to describe the crucial stage in which Man applied the idea of *objectivation* to his relations with his own self. This is described in one gem-sentence in the book of Genesis: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons.” (Gen. 3:7)

From this moment onwards, humanity was on its independent way to develop the acquired new position from which it could develop relations with the world and with itself. This was the moment when it began its long journey through time, and along time, forever to be tormented by questions, which grew out of the acquired ability of observation, and which dominated its relations with the world. The complications and the promises along the long path of human development stemming from its being simultaneously inside and outside the world were described in the epoch-making book of Martin Buber, *I and Thou*.

There are two kinds of relations or “primary words”, says Buber. One is the *I-It* relation, the other is the *I-Thou* one. *It* and *Thou* are two realms of existence, and the life of humanity revolves around both of them, being probably conscient of the first more than of the second.

The realm of *It* is that of the transitive verbs: *It* is the object of such verbs, whether these verbs describe the activity of the senses, or that of the mind and feelings. We see something, we touch something, we feel something, we will something, we think something and so on. In all these cases the something is the *It*, and the relation implies here an experience of an object in the physical or the mental sense. Human life, however, is far more sophisticated; the realm of the something, is only part of it. There is the other realm, that of the *I-Thou*, which is beyond the realm of the *I-It*.

When “*Thou*” is spoken, there is *nothing* as an object. An object has bounds, it is defined, in some way or another, mainly by other objects to which it stands in relation; but *Thou* has no bound, because when the speaker says “*Thou*”, he makes it standing in relation.” The *Thou* is not experienced, it is neither in time nor in place. It is a wholeness in which the details are scattered through the whole. Just as a melody is not a collection of notes and a verse a collection of words, so also the *Thou* is not a collection of details, it is oneness which is beyond experience, it represents being itself. When Man experiences the world, he has no part in this world, the experience is in him. The tree which I observe will remain a tree, an object, an *It*. But to be bound in relation is a different thing and this can happen even in the relation between man and nature, when a tree ceases to be “a tree” and becomes “my tree.” The mutuality of the relation can not be established in this case, but the idea is there.

In the relation of *I-Thou*, the *Thou* is a wholeness which in the relation between humans can be expressed by speech, and in the relation with spiritual beings is beyond expression. With spiritual beings we perceive no *Thou*, but nonetheless we *feel* that we are addressed and we answer. "We speak," says Buber, "the primary word *I-Thou* with our being." In other words, the standing in relation to the world, cast in the primary word *I-Thou*, represents the highest degree of human relations with its own being. But the unique human ability to relate either on the *I-It* level or the *I-Thou* one has its price

Having stepped out of the world - so to speak - placed Man in a perpetual danger of intolerable imbalance. His experience of his world implies questions, raises problems, on various levels. As long as Man can answer his questions and solve the problems, he is balanced and he lives in peace with himself. It is impossible for Man to live with an unsolved problem and with an unanswered question. When he is faced with such a situation he falls out of balance, and unless he can balance himself he is unable to continue normal life, and sometimes even to continue with life altogether.

As we have already posited above, since everything is an object of human observation, judgment and investigation, including oneself, humanity is busy in finding solutions to problems which sometimes create further questions demanding more answers. This dialectic existence of humanity forms the complications and promise of history.

Through the study of nature, namely through the experience of nature as an *It*, using his faculties, intellectual and physical, man has been solving the problems presented to him by the world of nature with considerable success. However it is the actual existence of the world, with its various components, which presents the greatest problem. The investigating nature of man was not satisfied with taming animals, tilling the ground, digging canals, using the wind, and splitting the atom. Two major problems which the world presents create the greatest imbalance: The first is the meaning of the perceived existence, and the second, the origin of this existence. In other words: The fact that of all creatures, only Man was endowed, with intelligence; with the power of perception and an inquisitive mind, and with the ability of learning and reasoning, compelled him to ask how nature works, and how it all came about. Without satisfactory answers to these two questions, Man lost his balance.

In fact, most humans lose their balance easily when faced with a problem, be it small or big, which they can not solve. One of the ways to deal with a situation which causes such imbalance is by a direct address of its cause, not necessarily by using the reasoning abilities of the mind, but by what might look like an unreasonable emotional outburst.

Consider a common situation: On a very rainy morning, you have to be at an important meeting at a certain hour. You are sure to be on time. You enter your car, turn the key, but the motor will not ignite. Again and again you try until the battery goes dead. Now you push the car out and down the road, trying to get the engine to come to life, but with no

success. By now you are late, and soaking wet. You are angry and helpless, you are totally out of balance, but you can do nothing at that moment except get out of the car, slam the door, kick it and shout “Damn you ”!At that moment, the car became your **Thou** :it filled for a moment the sky of your world, it became impersonated, you stood **in relation** to it and gained your balance.

In perceiving nature Man has been faced with the great mystery of birth and death, the mystery of constant creation and constant decay. These were the major problems, which certainly put him in imbalance. The answer to these problems seems to have been given by science and religion. There is no need to examine the theories which were developed in our century by the various schools of the philosophy and history of science, in order to see that science, representing human reason, and religion ,representing the spiritual, developed together, both attempting to supply answers to Man about the universe and his place in it.

Until modern times, and the appearance of the Enlightenment movement, science and religion were not in any conflict. Science dealt with the world in the realm of the primary word of **I-It** .But the answer to the real problem that troubles Man - the mystery of life and the shock of death - was given by the spiritual world of religion. I dare to say that for most of us, this is still the case. When faced with death of a dear person, no scientific explanation will be enough to restore the balance to Man, but how comforting are these words for the believer: “God hath given and God hath taken, may the name of God be blessed for ever and ever”.

It is easy to say that the limitation of human ability of investigation, the limitation and relativity of science, leads to religion. In other words, since the advancement of science leads to more questions as to the origin and the working of the universe, it must lead to faith. But this attitude stems from the view that science and religion are two separate and even conflicting realms. The rejectionist of religion would argue that there is no question that in principle has no scientific answer, if I may paraphrase Rudolf Carnap, one of the founders of logical positivism. The advance of science in our time could suggest that if there are problems still left to be answered, it is only a matter of time until all the mysteries of the universe will be fully answered.

Without rejecting science ,which deals and relates to the world as an object, as an **It** , most humans find it impossible to live life without meaning. They need the **Thou** ,the entity with which they can establish relations, which is complete, whole beyond want or division, that gives answers, that creates balance. With the **Thou** ,Man stands in relation by his being. And when the **Thou** is the Supreme Being, or better, the **Eternal Being** ,this relation can reach its highest degree when Man attains the Eternal here and now. We call this - Revelation. “Man receives,” says Buber“ ,not a specific ‘content’ but a Presence, a Presence as power) ”**I and Thou**(110 ,

A very few men reach this degree of revelation, in which the presence of the Eternal is certain beyond all doubt. And it is not, as William James described it, a hallucinatory presence of the Unknown. This presence and this power include three things, to go back to Buber: "First, there is the whole fullness of real mutual action ... it makes life heavier, but heavy with meaning. Secondly, meaning is assured. The question about the meaning of life is no longer there ... Thirdly, this meaning is not of another life, but that of this life of ours ..." It contains always a clear concept on which the *I-Thou* relation is based. The eternal being is unnamed, "I am what I am" - the eternal being can never be an *It*, an object of investigation. This is how Buber sees revelation. It is clear that only the few chosen experience the Presence of the Eternal; they are able to communicate the meaning and the contents of the revelation, and share it with other fellow men, thus widening the scope of the *I-Thou* relations. In the language of religion, this is the word of God, prophecy, God's laws, the Divine moral message, and any other definition which communicates the idea of the Eternal Presence in the midst of His creation. This is the major source for the restoration of human balance.

What has it all to do with science? Can we look for the spiritual in science? It is very interesting to consider the intellectual activity of the Jewish (and Muslim) rationalists of the Middle Ages in this regard, and the Bahá'í attitude to the same questions in our time .

There is a lot in common between the two attitudes, in spite of the fact that a gap of some thousand years divides them. In both cases, the medieval rationalists and the Bahá'í sacred writings do not see any conflict between science and religion. In both cases the attitude is that Man was endowed with intellect by God in order to use it to study God's creation, and through this study come to eventually appreciate God's greatness, grace and love. Both attitudes show that revelation and science are one and the same, and that through reason and logic Man would reach at the end, though after a long time, the same information disclosed by the mystery of revelation .

Influenced by Greek philosophy which reached them through the Greek translations of Aristotle, some of the atomists and Neo-Platonists, the Jewish and Muslim medieval philosophers were absolutely convinced of the ultimate truth of philosophy and science. But they were all men of religion and accepted revelation as the ultimate truth as well. The fascinating part in the study of medieval Jewish and Muslim philosophy is in following the brave attempts of these philosophers to prove that the scientific truth and the spiritual truth of revelation, are one and the same.

I wish to consider one of the early medieval Jewish philosophers and Biblical exegists, Saadia ben Joseph al-Fayyûmî, known in Jewish history as Saadia Gaon (892-942). He was influenced by both Greek philosophy and Islamic Kalâm. His main book was written in Arabic ,and he called it *Kitâb al-Mukhtâr fî al-Amânât wa-al-I'tiqâdât* ,or in short, the

book of *Beliefs and Opinions* .The basic idea presented in this book is that there is nothing which cannot be proved by rational investigation and logic, including the existence of God. Moreover ,Saadia went even further saying that anything which can not be logically proved is false. The conclusion from this is that by necessity all that is taught by religion must be proved by science.

Once this conclusion was reached, Saadia says:

“It is inevitable to attach to this idea an issue which can not be avoided, namely, that we should ask: if all the religious matters can be acquired by investigation and true speculation, and as they were communicated to us by our Lord, so where is the face of wisdom in giving them to us through prophecy, and perform, in order to prove them, perceived miracles and not intellectual proofs”?

إذ كانت الأمور الدينية تحصل بالبحث والنظر الصحيح على ما أخبرنا ربنا فما وجه الحكمة في أن أتانا بها عن وجه الرسالة وأقام عليها براهين الآيات المرئية لا البراهين العقلية؟

Saadia continues, answering his own rhetorical question:

“Because it is known to the Omniscient (God) that the information deduced by intellectual investigation(المطلوبات المستخرجة من صنعة النظر) can be acquired only after a long period of time, and if He were to direct us towards this (intellectual investigation) in order to achieve the knowledge of religion ,we would have remained a long time without religion, until our (speculative activity is accomplished, and ready to be put into practice. Some people would never be able to achieve this accomplishment either because of lack of patience or because of any other deficiency in them, or because they would be overcome by doubts which could cause them to be shocked, and lose their way. This is the reason why God saved us all these troubles and sent us his messengers and informed us about everything, and revealed to our eyes the signs about which there can be no doubt.” (Saadia ,**Introduction**(27 ,

Saadia here refers to the revelations as they are reported in the Hebrew Scriptures.

I could have quoted many other Muslim and Jewish medieval philosophers who repeat the same or similar ideas. They could either be Mu‘tazilites like ‘Abd al-Jabbâr, or philosophers like al-Farâbî or Maimonides, or Neo-Platonists like Ibn Gabirol. All of them emphasized the fact that the truth of philosophy reached by human investigation is identical to the truth of revelation. The fact that they had to indulge in logical acrobatics many times to prove this point is immaterial for our discussion; what is important is the fact that they looked for the spiritual in the scientific, that they elevated Man’s reasoning ability to the stage of

attempting a systematic answer of the two major questions: The origin of the universe and the cause of its regular movement.

They put knowledge before faith, or better, made knowledge and logic the main source of true religious feeling and the basis for human moral behavior. Maimonides opens his magnum opus ,**The Strong Arm** ,in which he codifies Jewish law, with one sentence which sums it all up:

“ The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of all wisdoms it is to **know** that there is a Prime Being who invented everything that exists ”...

יסוד היסודות ועמוד החכמות לידע שיש שם מצוי ראשון והוא ממציא כל נמצא.
(משנה תורה, ספר המדע, הלכות יסודי התורה: א, א')

Maimonides does not use the word “believe” or “have faith,” but the word “know” or “recognize.” Throughout the whole of his work he attempted to prove that the knowledge, namely the logical proof, of God’s existence is not only possible but mainly necessary , without which there could not be true religious feeling. To make sure that this knowledge of God amounts to a spiritual relationship, Maimonides placed it at the head of his 13 articles of faith which he formulated for the Jewish religion, and it was not long before it gained its mystical form in two poems which became integral parts of the Jewish prayer.

If we return for a moment to Buber’s primary word ,*I-Thou* ,it would not be farfetched to say that the medieval philosophers looked for the *Thou* in the *It* ,and found God in the mystery of the unique creature - Man endowed with a speculative mind. It is very interesting that this spiritual foundation of science, or the scientific contents of the spiritual, forms one of the major foundations of Bahá’í theology.

Man’s intellectual capacity ,the Bahá’í point of view maintains, is the prime consideration when one regards science, because only this capacity makes science possible. “The ideal faculties of Man,” says ‘Abd al- Bahá’, “including the capacity for scientific acquisition, are beyond Nature’s ken. These are powers whereby Man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life) ”.*Promulgation of Universal Peace*(57 ,

This special capability of Man for intellectual activity is the mystery of creation, it is regarded as part of the divine system. It was given to man for purpose, and from a theological point of view, this purpose is to enable Man to discover God in his creation, to come to acknowledge His infinite greatness through perceiving, if not fully understanding, the orderly system of the universe .

In this regard how fitting are the words in the book of Psalms: “The Heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His Handiworks.” (Psalms 19:12) Exactly

because of the presence of God in His creation that it is incumbent upon Man to acquire information, to indulge in science.

“God has created in Man the power of reason,” says ‘Abd al- Bahá’, “whereby Man is enabled to investigate reality ... He has endowed him with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which , he is to investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept”.

‘Abd al- Bahá’ is thus very clear: Tradition, imitation of ancestors, blind faith, negate the purpose of the creation of Man as a unique **thinking** creature. “The greatest cause of bereavement and disheartening in the world of humanity is ignorance based upon blind imitation) ”.*Promulgation of Universal peace*(291 ,

In that ‘Abd al- Bahá ’voiced clearly the idea which forms the scientific outlook of the Bahá’í faith ,whereby Man is called upon to use the powers of his mind which enable him to create abstraction rather than to rely “on passive absorption of information) ”.Khurshid, 111(

Religion and science, in Bahá’í thinking, are not two realms opposing or different from each other. The real progress of religion is by freeing it from prejudices, and basing it on the free investigation which is in the heart of the human being. The investigation of the **It** of the universe as an object is necessary for the progress of religion, for establishing the relation of the **I-Thou** .There is no science without religion, and no religion without science. For religion without science deteriorates to mere superstition, and science without religion becomes mere materialism.

How near this attitude is to the thinking of the Jewish and Muslim philosophers of the Middle Ages. There are, however, two differences. The first is that then ,the medieval philosophers were *talking to each other* .Their ideas, their debates, their doubts and their solutions never left their circle of intellectuals. The Bahá’í writings wish to bring this idea to all. The second is that the medieval philosophers, following in the footsteps of their Greek masters ,applied their logical examination to God Himself; to his actual existence, to His attributes, and to His involvement with creation. These are subjects which the Bahá’í teachers regard to be beyond the ability of human mind. The attainment of the Divine Presence can be achieved only through the knowledge of God’s Dispensation in the intermediate world of Cause. This is the essence of the opening verse of **al-Kitab al-Aqdas** .The key word in it is the Arabic word ‘ *irfân* which combines the idea of knowledge and mental recognition in regards to the Dispensation - the only possible representation of the Divine Being.

Let me conclude with two quotations from ‘Abd al-Bahá’ that sum up this idea:

“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 and 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) ”... *Paris Talks*(143 ,

“When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles - and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God) ”.*Paris Talks*.(146 ,

وبه آقای دکتور حسین دانش وشاهزاده دکتور میخائیل بن میرزا وآقای شاهین صبحانی
وسایر دوستان عزیز که دلم آویختید بنده میخواهد موافق لسان کتاب مستطاب اقدس این حرف
بگوید: علیکم بهاؤه وجلاله وعنايته ورحمته وسلامه الی ابد الابدین

I shall leave these words without translation as they stand in Persian and Arabic; and to all my colleagues and friends here, and to the students who are finishing a stage in life and beginning a new one I wish to use the Hebrew blessing “Go from strength to strength”.

And to all of you, ladies and gentlemen, to the dedicated staff of this institution, and to the Bahá’í community, happy or persecuted, to Switzerland ,let me say in a paraphrase “Be you in peace, and may your house be in peace, and all that you possess may be in peace.” God bless you all.