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Studies in Bahá'í Philosophy

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith is a modern religion, which was founded by Mirza Hussein Ali, a Persian prophet who is known under his religious name of Bahá'u'lláh (the “Glory of God” in Arabic).

Bahá'u'lláh was born in Iran in 1817. As a young man he joined a religious movement of Babism whose followers were expecting a new revelation that had to be delivered by the coming messenger of God. The group was initiated in Iran in 1844 and soon was suppressed by the government. Its leader, the Bab (whose religious name means the “Gate” in Arabic) was executed in 1850. After Bab's martyrdom, Bahá'u'lláh came to the forefront of the movement and in 1863 proclaimed himself to be the promised messenger.

The founder of the new religion that came to be known as the Bahá'í Faith preached for the next twenty-nine years of his life that he spent in exile. After Bahá'u'lláh's death, his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the “Servant of Glory”), became the head of the Bahá'í community. Later the leadership was passed on to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson Shoghi Effendi and in 1963 – to the Universal House of Justice, whose first members were elected by the Bahá'í representatives.

The principles of the Bahá'í religion reflect its main purpose, namely, the global unity of humankind. According to Bahá'u'lláh, such a unity cannot be reached without a spiritual revival and human unification under the guidance of one faith. This is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the success of globalization, however. In the sphere of politics, as Bahá'u'lláh argues, it is imperative to create a world federation and an international tribunal that would represent the interests of all nations and maintain universal peace. In the social domain there is a need for balanced economic development of different countries, protection of human rights regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, social status or gender. In the sphere of culture one needs obligatory universal education, acceptance of a common script as well as harmonious development of science and religion. Finally, on the existential level, every individual must independently strive for truth and overcome prejudices, especially those that lead to conflict or any form of intolerance and fanaticism.

The administrative structure of the Bahá'í Faith is based on the principle of democratic centralism. Members of the local community, 21 years and older, once a year elect a Local Spiritual Assembly that consists of nine members and governs the affairs of its locality. Delegates from Local Spiritual Assemblies every year elect nine members of the National Spiritual Assembly. Every five years the members of National Spiritual Assemblies of all countries elect the Universal House of Justice. The Universal House of Justice is located in Haifa, Israel, and is the supreme governing body of the faith. Its decisions, which have been invested with infallibility by Bahá'u'lláh, are made on the basis of consensus or, if such a consensus cannot be reached, by the simple majority vote.

According to statistical data, there are more than five million Bahá'ís all over the world. Bahá'í local communities are established in 236 countries and dependent territories. Its members represent 2112 racial, ethnic and tribal groups.¹

Mikhail Sergeev

1. http://bahai-library.com/bolhuis_bahai_statistics_2001

IAN KLUGE

Bloch's Philosophy of Hope and the Bahá'í Writings

Ian Kluge is a poet, playwright and philosophy scholar who lives in Prince George, British Columbia. He has an M.A. and PhD (ABD) from the University of Alberta, Edmonton, and currently teaches courses for the BIHE and the Wilmette Institute. Ian Kluge has published numerous articles about philosophical aspects of the Baha'í Writings. He is also the author of several books, including *Conrad Aiken's Philosophy of Consciousness* and two collections of poetry – *Elegies* and *For the Lord of the Crimson Ark*.

Introduction

At first glance, any comparison between Ernst Bloch's "philosophy of hope" and the Bahá'í Writings looks like an unpromising venture. What could the ideas of a Marxist philosopher, even an exiled renegade like Bloch, have in common with a religious world-view based on divine revelation or the authorized interpretations thereof? However, despite superficial appearances, the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch share one key underlying similarity – adherence to an evolutionary world-view. Both agree that reality is a teleological process in which all things strive to actualize their inherent potentials and thereby to complete themselves in their highest possible condition. The drive to completion, or entelechy,¹ is found in varying degrees in inanimate objects, living things and above all, in human beings both as individuals and communities. This universal striving for the "Not Yet,"² for the better future, forms the basis for a new metaphysics and a new understanding of human nature and history as well as humankind's religious evolution. Because the key concepts and language of this process world-view – for example 'actuality,' 'actualize,' 'potentials,' 'teleology' and 'entelechy' – were first systematically

1. F. E Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1967), p. 57.

2. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 75.

developed by Aristotle,³ this outlook might well be described as 'Aristotelian.'⁴

Before we proceed, however, it should be made clear that the Bahá'í Writings are divine revelation and not simply another philosophy. In the words of Shoghi Effendi:

For the Cause is not a system of philosophy; it is essentially a way of life, a religious faith that seeks to unite all people on a common basis of mutual understanding and love, and in a common devotion to God.⁵

However, while the Bahá'í Faith is not a philosophy in itself, it does, nonetheless, encompass philosophy within its framework, as made clear by Shoghi Effendi's references to "the Bahá'í philosophy of progressive revelation,"⁶ and "the Bahá'í philosophy of social and political organization."⁷ Furthermore, it should also be noted that Shoghi Effendi points out that the Writings have philosophical aspects, when, for example, he states,

Nor should a review of the outstanding features of Bahá'u'lláh's writings during the latter part of His banishment to Akká fail to include a reference to the Lawh-i-Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), *in which He sets forth the fundamentals of true philosophy.*⁸ Here, Shoghi Effendi clearly states that the Writings encompass a "true philosophy" the "fundamentals" of which are given by Bahá'u'lláh. Unfortunately, we cannot pursue the possible implications of this statement.⁹

3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* and *Physics* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952).

4. A more detailed study of this can be found in Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfan*, vol. 4 (Evanston, IL: `Irfán Colloquium, 2003). Vincent Geoghegan writes, Bloch "is clearly excited by what he terms 'left-wing Aristotelianism' . . . particularly of Aristotle's notion of the realization or 'entelechy' of matter." Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 29. Bloch traced this aspect of Aristotle's philosophy down to Hegel.

5. Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 75.

6. Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community* (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 432.

7. Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. I (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 55.

8. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 219. Emphasis added.

9. For example, could two different, even contradictory philosophies be developed from the same foundational truths provided by Bahá'u'lláh and thereby illustrate "unity in diversity"? Or do the Writings provide the "fundamentals" for one over-arching philosophy for the unified world?

Shoghi Effendi not only recognizes that the Writings encompass a philosophy but also encouraged Bahá'ís to undertake studies correlating the Writings to developments in philosophy:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will . . . *be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science.* Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.¹⁰

Such 'correlation work' is obviously important because it makes the Bahá'í teachings part of the discussions of contemporary issues and this, in itself, is valuable to the discussions themselves as well as being useful in teaching and dialoguing with other philosophies and belief systems. In particular, elucidating the correlations with Bloch's *Principle of Hope* opens the door to dialogue with such highly influential Christian theologians as Jürgen Moltmann, author of *Theology of Hope*. This work, a conscious application of Bloch's philosophy to Christian teachings inspired the 'theology of hope' movement among contemporary Christians.

Finally, this introduction should make it clear that although this paper will focus on the foundational similarities between the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch, there are differences that generate irresolvable tension between them. While there is considerable agreement in regards to ontology, the philosophy of human nature and even God, there are obvious differences with Bloch's misguided application of his philosophy to support the dictatorship of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Such support contradicts Bahá'u'lláh's frequent condemnations of oppression as a hindrance to human unity and progress:

So long, however, as the thick clouds of oppression, which obscures the day star of justice, remain undispelled, it would be difficult for the glory of this station [of unity] to be unveiled to men's eyes. . . .¹¹

10. Letter to an individual believer on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, August 6, 1933, in *Scholarship* (Compilation) (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 17. Emphasis added.

11. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 287.

ʿAbdu'l-Bahá also rebukes oppressive regimes such as those Bloch supported by saying:

When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail, that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs, development and growth are inevitable.¹²

Another problem is Bloch's support for partisan politics, something that Bahá'ís are required to avoid because of its disunifying effects on society. Instead, Bahá'ís are encouraged to focus on the positive growth-facilitating potentials in social developments.¹³ Nor do the Bahá'í Writings agree with Bloch's support for radical and subversive movements:

Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh. *Far from aiming at the subversion of the existing foundations of society*, it seeks to broaden its basis, to remold its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of an ever-changing world. It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy.¹⁴

In other words, Bahá'ís are not political revolutionaries dedicated to overthrowing governments. Rather, Bahá'ís are 'evolutionaries' who believe in fostering progress by developing, i.e. actualizing, the positive growth potentials in individuals and society.

The conclusion to draw from these differences is that Bloch's own application of his foundational ideas to the particular political situations of his time is problematical and contradictory to the Bahá'í Writings. However, this difference with Bloch's political application need not prevent us from recognizing a number of foundational similarities with the Writings and from applying these in a manner consistent with Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. While Bahá'í Writings converge with Bloch's ontology, and much of his philosophy of man and God, they diverge considerably regarding the practical application of these ideas.

12. ʿAbdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 197.

13. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 41.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 41. Emphasis added.

Ontology: All things in teleological process

Ontology concerns our theory of reality, i.e., our beliefs about the nature of being and the structure of reality.¹⁵ The subjects covered by ontology concern the most basic aspects of reality, such as what is or is not 'real', stasis and change, the origin of reality and the basic 'stuff' of the universe. Because ontology answers these foundational questions about the nature of reality, it directly and indirectly shapes our views on virtually all other philosophical subjects such as epistemology, ethics, philosophy of science as well as existential issues of individuality, meaning and value. Given the importance of ontology, we shall begin our comparisons between the Bahá'í Faith and Bloch's philosophy with a study of their commonalities.

Bloch and the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings are process philosophies in which the universe and all its phenomena are not only inherently dynamic but are also in orderly change to actualize their intrinsic potentials as completely as possible. However, because nothing is ever complete, but always possesses other potentials to actualize, Bloch calls his view "[t]he ontology of Not-yet-being."¹⁶

According to the Bahá'í Writings, "phenomenal existence"¹⁷ i.e., the material world¹⁸ is characterized by ceaseless change. `Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose--that is to say, all things are in motion . . . this state of motion is said to be essential – that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement.¹⁹

In this categorical assertion, `Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that movement and change are necessary to phenomenal existence, a theme he also emphasizes by saying, "Divine and all encompassing Wisdom hath

15. Ted Honderich, ed, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 634.

16. Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, trans. By J. T. Swann (London: Verso, 2009), p. 55.

17. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 284.

18. *Ibid.*

19. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 233. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 284.

ordained that motion be an inseparable concomitant of existence . . .”²⁰ ‘Motion’ in these statements refers not only to a change in space but also to a change in time, in condition, in relationship, in appearance, constitution or structure, intensity, color, size shape – indeed, any kind of accidental or essential difference between two moments in the existence of an entity. Change does not just refer to the material but to the spiritual as well. Even our souls are subject to change, as evident in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement that the soul is “in motion and ever active,”²¹ something also apparent in the concept of the soul’s continued evolution after death.

The process philosophy inherent in the Bahá'í Writings is not mere random, directionless change; it also makes clear that phenomenal change has a direction and a goal, i.e. is teleological or possesses a final cause. This, too, agrees with Aristotle.²² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

. . . for the existence of everything depends upon four causes – the efficient cause, the matter, the form and the final cause. For example, this chair has a maker who is a carpenter, a substance, which is wood, a form, which is that of a chair, and a purpose which is that it is to be used as a seat.²³

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, each of the four causes contributes to the formation of a thing; for a chair to exist, there must be wood (or metal, plastic); there must be someone who shapes the pieces for their various functions; there must be a plan/form according to which the pieces are shaped and put together, and finally, the plan/form must come into being to fulfill a certain goal, i.e., the final cause. The process of making the chair possesses its own entelechy or drive to completion which attains actuality in the chair itself.

Because the Bahá'í Writings are not just philosophy but revealed scripture, they also express this belief in goal-orientation, in teleology in religious language. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, “From this same God all creation sprang into existence, and He is the one *goal, towards which*

20. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe* (Original Tablet in *Makātib-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, vol. 1. http://bahai-library.com/?file=abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih.html). Anonymous Translation. 13-32.

21. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet to Auguste Forel*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 8.

22. Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198 a, b; *Metaphysics*, V, 1, 1013 a, b.

23. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280. The concept of four-fold causality and the names for the four types of causes originate in Aristotle.

everything in nature yearns."²⁴ This concept is also found in the following prayer by Bahá'u'lláh:

Lauded be Thy name, O my God and the God of all things, my Glory and the Glory of all things, my Desire and *the Desire of all things*, my Strength and the Strength of all things, my King and the King of all things, my Possessor and the Possessor of all things, my Aim and *the Aim of all things*, my Mover and *the Mover of all things!*²⁵

Here we have a reference to the goal or "Aim" oriented nature of every being, as well as the universal desire for God as the ultimate destination of the striving of "all things." We also observe that God is the "Mover of all things." This means not only that God provides the energy by which everything moves or develops but also that God is the Great Attractor or the "Prime Mover"²⁶ towards which all things move in their desire for actualization and completion.

In the Bahá'í Writings, the ultimate goal is to evolve into a higher and God-like condition though, of course, no phenomenal being can ever attain God's ontological state.²⁷ However, the mediate goal by which we strive towards this final end is the actualization of latent potentials. Theologically, these potentials are often described as the "sign" or "names" of God made visible in all created things. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the *attributes and names of God*, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light . . . To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are *potentially revealed* all the attributes and names of God.²⁸

These "attributes and names of God" are "potentially revealed" most abundantly in humankind but also in all phenomenal beings, which must actualize these potentials for them to be disclosed in the phenomenal

24. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 51. Emphasis added.

25. Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), p. 58. Emphasis added.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

27. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 233-34.

28. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 177. Emphasis added. See also pp. 65-66.

world. However, for human beings, having these attributes “latent within [man]”²⁹ is not enough; humans must work or labor to actualize them since “[t]he radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror.”³⁰ This, of course, suggests the importance of the work and labor by which humans ‘make themselves’ in realizing their potentials individually and socially and, thereby, developing throughout history. In that way Bahá'í ontology provides the foundation for the teaching that work performed in the spirit of service is worship and, by extension, the inherent dignity of labor.³¹

In addition, the Writings refer to the existence of potentials directly when they note the virtues “potential in the seed,”³² of the sun awakening “all that is potential in the earth,”³³ of the “virtues potential in mankind,”³⁴ of the inventions “potential in the world of nature”³⁵ and of the embryo progressing until “that which was potential in it – namely, the human image – appears.”³⁶ Of similar import are the passages referring to the “mysteries latent in nature”³⁷ which are actualized by humankind, the “latent talents”³⁸ hidden in human beings, the “divine perfections latent in the heart of man,”³⁹ the “latent realities within the bosom of the earth,”⁴⁰ and the “the greater world, the macrocosm . . . latent and miniature in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man.”⁴¹ The same idea is implicit in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that we are to “[r]egard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,”⁴² which is to say that humankind possesses invaluable potentials that must be actualized through education. `Abdu'l-Bahá provides a philosophical argument for the reality of these potentials when he says, “no sign can come from a non-existing thing.”⁴³ Because potentials give real results, they must be real. If they were not, there could be no changes since these changes cannot come from nothing.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

31. Bahá'í International Community. 1989, Jan. 02. *Position Statement on Education*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>)

32. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 91.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

40. `Abdu'l-Bahá. *Foundations of World Unity* (Wilmette II: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 70.

41. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 69-70.

42. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 260.

43. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.

Since the concept of teleological change and actualizing potentials is often misunderstood it is worthwhile to engage in a brief digression to correct several common misapprehensions and to explain it in a manner amenable to modern readers. First, the final or formal causes need not be conscious intentions or plans as critics often assume; Aristotle who invented the concept of four-fold causality explicitly rejects this idea.⁴⁴ Therefore, final causality can also apply to unconscious natural processes. Second, as several contemporary philosophers have pointed out, the final cause may be viewed as referring to the laws of nature which limit physical processes i.e., the action of efficient causes, to a limited number of results. For example, we cannot sow iron filings and harvest sunflowers. Whatever changes iron filings may undergo, the laws of nature do not allow a change into sunflowers; at each moment, natural laws restrict changes to a certain number of outcomes though they do not guide towards these outcomes consciously.⁴⁵ This step-by-step guidance leads to the identical goal in identical processes. In other words, as Aristotle points out, the efficient, formal and final causes act together.⁴⁶ Thus, a process does not simply proceed randomly to any possible outcome; it is subject to limits imposed by physical laws, and these physical laws ensure that each aspect of the efficient cause (process) attains only certain ends until a final stage is reached. In the words of philosopher W. Norris Clarke:

[i]f the efficient cause at the moment of its productive action is not interiorly [inherently] determined or focused towards producing this effect rather than that, then there is no sufficient reason why it should produce this one rather than that.⁴⁷

Efficient causes always lead to particular effects, and if nothing constrains an efficient cause from acting one way or another, any effect at all could follow randomly from any action. However, nature provides regularly observable effects – the very basis of science – so, therefore, efficient causality is constrained by an inherent limitation, i.e., final causality.

44. Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 8, 199b.

45. Henry B Veatch, *Aristotle: A Contemporary Appreciation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1974), p. 48. See also Norris Clark, *The One and the Many* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre dame Press, 2006), pp. 200-01.

46. Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198a.

47. W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 201.

The concept of a dynamic teleological world process of actualizing potentials forms the ontological basis for Bloch's philosophy of hope. He writes:

Only with the farewell to the closed, static concept of being does the real dimension of hope open. Instead, *the world is full of propensity towards something, tending towards something, latency of something, and this intended something means fulfillment of the intending.*⁴⁸

In other words, the universe is active, a process that is open to genuinely novel developments in the future. But more than that, all processes have entelechy, a drive to completion or "fulfillment" of their latencies; consequently, all things have a future orientation as required by a philosophy of hope. Consciously or not, they aim to realize themselves at their highest level of development, which he identifies with their 'utopia.' These latencies or potentials are as real as the actually manifested attributes of things and help to establish their essential identity; the potentials a thing possesses constitute part of what it is and distinguish it from the rest of reality both as a member of a class of things and as an individual. Moreover, because all things possess the entelechy to complete themselves to the maximal possible degree, Bloch is able to claim that 'utopia,' the aim for one's highest possible state, is an integral part of the real world and that our understanding of this world is incomplete unless we take them into account.

*Reality without real possibilities is not complete, the world without future-laden propensities does not deserve a glance . . . Concrete utopia stands on the horizon of every reality; real possibility surrounds the open dialectical tendencies and latencies to the very last.*⁴⁹

Because all things have real potentials, Bloch describes them as "not yet"⁵⁰ or "Not-Yet-Being"⁵¹ involved in "venturing beyond"⁵² themselves as they are, i.e., engaged in 'self-transcendence.' They seek to complete themselves by striving for the "concrete utopia," i.e., their best possible

48. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 18. Emphasis added.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 223. Emphasis added.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 114. Bloch uses the phrase "not-yet" in various combinations throughout his books, as in "not-yet-conscious," *ibid.*, p. 113 or "That-Which-Is-Not-Yet," *ibid.*, p. 237. The purpose is to indicate the incomplete nature of all things.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

state of being and in that sense, hope is an inherent and objective part of their existence. It “is not merely a projection of reason, a ‘mental creation’ of human thought but an expression of what is really possible.”⁵³

The “concrete utopia” standing “on the horizon of every reality” is the ontological basis for hope, the positive forward orientation towards new actualizations of other potentials and the fulfillment of each potential at its highest level. In humans, this structurally present hope comes to light as “anticipatory consciousness” in which we are guided by what we know could be. This may manifest as dreams, day-dreams (Bloch distinguishes the two) in literature or film and even political manifestoes. Hope, therefore, is not merely a personal subjective response, but rather is an epistemological act based on awareness of the nature of reality itself. To say it paradoxically, hope is realistic; indeed, it is the only realistic attitude towards reality because it alone recognizes the intrinsic drive to actualize and complete inherent potentials.

At this point it is clear that despite the differences of language, the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch's philosophy of hope share similar ontologies regarding the process nature of the phenomenal world. This is important because it means that many of the similarities between the two philosophies are foundational, i.e., grounded in similar ontologies and are, therefore, essential and are not merely coincidental or accidental. However, because the Bahá'í Writings are religious in nature and Bloch's work comes from the militantly anti-religious Marxist tradition, we shall have to examine whether there is any meeting or at least convergence on the subject of God. We shall examine this later.

On the basis of this teleological, forward-looking ontology, Bloch and the Bahá'í Writings also share a fundamentally positive or optimistic outlook on the phenomenal world, human nature and history. There are always two processes going on in human development – a declining process but more importantly, a growing or developing process as new, hitherto hidden potentials actualize or manifest themselves.

Precisely because of this forward-looking vision, Bloch describes his philosophy as ‘utopian.’ For him, ‘utopian’ does not refer to dreams of impossibly perfect societies, people or environments; rather, it refers to the intrinsic drive of all things to the actualization and completion or perfection of their own potentials. Glimmers of this drive can be detected in even the most decrepit and degenerate human productions, so there is always something positive to observe in them. Amidst the dead, decaying, historical forms of religions or culture we can still find a living, humanly

53. Ze'ev Levy, “Utopia and Reality,” in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (New York: Verso, 1970), p. 177.

worthwhile aspect, which Bloch calls the “utopian surplus”⁵⁴ or a “cultural surplus.”⁵⁵ This surplus is worth salvaging or re-inventing in a new form as culture evolves.

In the Bahá'í Writings, this positive outlook is evident in the doctrine of “progressive revelation” in which Manifestations provide a *restatement of the eternal verities* underlying all the religions of the past, as a unifying force instilling into the adherents of these religions a *new spiritual vigor*, infusing them with a *new hope* and love for mankind, firing them with a *new vision* of fundamental unity of their religious doctrines, and unfolding to their eyes the *glorious destiny* that awaits the human race.⁵⁶

In this one statement we readily discern convergences with Bloch's philosophy. The “eternal verities” retained and developed by successive Manifestations are reflected in Bloch's “utopian surplus” or “cultural surplus” that should be saved and integrated into future developments. The hopeful, positive spirit is seen in the “new spiritual vigor,” the “new hope” and the “glorious destiny” which the new revelation infuses into humankind. These phrases also implicitly contain the idea of progress that is so essential to Bloch because a “new vision,” or “new spirit” require that some teachings that are not “eternal verities” will be left behind as we move beyond them. The positive attitude that Bloch and the Writings share is succinctly and vividly conveyed by `Abdu'l-Bahá's story of Jesus and the dead dog. Seeing a decaying dog carcass, the disciples remarked how awful it looked and smelled, to which Christ replied by pointing out its shining white teeth.⁵⁷ This story illustrates the attitude Bahá'ís are encouraged to cultivate. Bahá'ís are encouraged to look for positive, ‘utopian’ signs of development as humanity actualizes the potential for a spiritually unified global society even though these ‘utopian’ signs are often found among symptoms of decay and degeneration of an old and dying world order.

Thus, for Bloch and the Bahá'í Writings, the criticism that their proposals and teachings are ‘utopian’ is not negative, but rather, positive because for them the term ‘utopian’ refers to the essential nature, a genuine inherent impulse, of all phenomenal beings. Because all things

54. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. by Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 196.

55. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, p. 164.

56. Shoghi Effendi, *Summary Statement - 1947, Special UN Committee on Palestine*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>). Emphasis added.

57. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1978), p. 169.

strive for their potential utopian state, the Lesser and the Most Great Peace are not impossible dreams but realizable intrinsic possibilities of the human condition that are available for individual and collective choice and subsequent action. It is up to us to develop the “anticipatory consciousness”⁵⁸ that allows us to recognize and actualize the “emancipatory potential,”⁵⁹ in our personal and collective situations. Doing so requires what Bloch calls a “rationalism of the heart,”⁶⁰ which goes beyond the “thinking theoretical Cartesian subject”⁶¹ and the “reflexive mechanics”⁶² of abstract intellectuality.

The philosophy of God

Were Ernst Bloch a militantly polemical “new atheist” in the manner of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens or a philosophical atheist like Marx, Freud, Bertrand Russell or Jean-Paul Sartre, it would be extraordinarily difficult if not impossible to harmonize his beliefs with those of the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of God. However, while Bloch certainly portrayed himself as a Marxist, the issue of his ‘atheism’ is far from clear. In the first place, he made prolonged efforts to salvage a useable “utopian surplus”⁶³ from humanity’s religious past, especially from Judaism and Christianity, though he also accepted other religions as well as mythology as repositories of the “utopian surplus.” Obviously he does not really think of religion as nothing but “opium”⁶⁴ for the people.

In his struggle to adapt the “utopian surplus” from religion, Bloch “refunctioned”⁶⁵ i.e., re-interpreted certain religious motifs to show how ancient beliefs often pointed to values and/or ideas that were useful in other ages and in vastly different material-economic circumstances. For example, Bloch “re-functions” Christ, the “Son of Man” to represent a new awareness of the potentials inherent in earthly existence and human beings themselves.⁶⁶ This aspect of Christ is part of the enduring “utopian surplus” of human evolution, whereas the portrayal of Christ as the “Son of God” is, for Bloch, merely a dispensable artifact of a past cultural situation. Bloch’s ideas overlap somewhat with the Bahá'í’s concept of

58. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 43.

59. Douglas Kellner, “Ernst Bloch, *Utopia and Ideology Critique*,” in *Not-Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (New York: Verso, 1970), p. 93.

60. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 176.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 196.

64. Karl Marx, Introduction to “*A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*,” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm#05>

65. Richard Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 127.

66. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 201.

“progressive revelation,”⁶⁷ i.e., the belief that God sends successive Manifestations to restate the “eternal verities”⁶⁸ as humankind evolves, to separate essential from non-essential culture-bound elements, and to “separate the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions.”⁶⁹ Although different in their outward historical appearances, these Manifestations are spiritually one. Bloch’s ideas and the Bahá’í teaching of progressive revelation coincide on the existence of religious teachings that endure through time and are valid across cultural differences. This implies that religion has some positive value – an idea which conflicts with Marxism. On the other hand, Bloch’s philosophy cannot embrace the Bahá’í teaching that Manifestations are sent by God and are essentially one, sharing the station of “essential unity.”⁷⁰ However, as we have seen here, and will see below, Bloch’s philosophy has a very ‘porous border’ with religion; its atheism is an accidental feature of his philosophy, whereas its openness to the transcendent and God is foundational or essential.

Furthermore, Bloch’s beliefs about the ontological reality of potentials raise questions about the nature of his atheism. Bloch admits that his ontology is not compatible with strict materialism, which he actually describes as “vulgar materialism,”⁷¹ i.e., a materialism that denies the existence of anything that cannot be measured and is not physical, be it matter or energy. But what about potentials and latencies? In material things, they have no physical existence as separable entities somehow ‘hidden’ in matter and in that sense are not objects of scientific study. Yet for Bloch (and the Baha’i Writings) they are as real as any physical attribute and are essential to understanding what a thing actually is. However, if potentials are real but not material or scientifically measurable, they must somehow be transcendent to phenomenal reality. But an obvious question arises. If these transcendent realities exist, then how do we rule out the existence of God, Who, like these potentials is also real but not material? There is nothing within Bloch’s philosophy that rules out God, although, God will have to be thought of in a non-traditional way. Indeed, as we shall see below, Bloch’s concept of God comes very close to one of `Abdu’l-Bahá’s characterizations of God.

Further exploration of Bloch’s quasi-atheism requires a brief detour through Ludwig Feuerbach’s radical theory about the nature of religion.

67. Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá’í Community* (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 432.

68. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 108.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

70. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 50.

71. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. III, p. 1292.

Here, too, we shall find similarities to the Bahá'í Writings. According to Feuerbach (1804-1872), humans make God in their image, just as the Greek philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon said that if oxen could imagine gods, they would imagine them as oxen" – a poetic pre-figuration of Feuerbach's concept of God as the outward projection or objectification of the human essence freed from all phenomenal limitations. Humans objectify or project their own inner nature – intelligence love, creativity, justice but also anger, a demand for obedience, a desire to punish – and they call this objectified image of themselves 'God' to Whom they give a separate existence that transcends phenomenal reality. In Feuerbach's view, humans free themselves from God by recognizing themselves in their image of God; then they are no longer in its power. When humans re-appropriate all of God's attributes back to themselves, God ceases to exist. He becomes no more than a negative idea without knowable content.

Bloch basically accepts the outlines of Feuerbach's view but develops it in his own direction. He agrees that "religious founders represent a mythologically disguised possibility of becoming human,"⁷² i.e., the God worshipped by humans is a perfected vision of ourselves disguised as existing transcendently on a higher ontological, epistemological and ethical plane. For Bloch as for Feuerbach, atheism is the rejection of this projected, man-made vision of God.

The Bahá'í Writings have a remarkably similar outlook. They recognize that the images and conceptions of God that people possess are cultural and personal, i.e., do not – and cannot – reflect God as He actually is in Himself. These images of God are as the human imagination has shaped Him, usually not only as possessing our highest intellectual and moral ideals but also as possessing unlimited strength and enormous punitive powers. We project these idealized images of our deepest desires on the unknowable God. Our cognitive task is to recognize these images for the man-made projections they are and not to mistake them for the reality of God. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that people

. . . have pictured a god in the realm of the mind, and worship that image which they have made for themselves. . . . They have created a creator within their own minds, and they call it the Fashioner of all that is – whereas in truth it is but an illusion. Thus are the people worshipping only an error of perception.⁷³

72. Richard Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph*, p. 171.

73. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 53-54.

Of course, God, “that Essence of Essences, that Invisible of Invisibles, is sanctified above all human speculation, and never to be overtaken by the mind of man.”⁷⁴ Whatever virtues we attribute to God do not prove anything positive about God but only demonstrates that God does not lack them: when we praise God, “[w]e affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections.”⁷⁵ We must never mistake our images of God for God Himself.

This teaching is clearly foundational to the concept of progressive revelation which involves, among other things, the necessity of leaving old, no longer historically appropriate projections behind and advancing to higher levels of understanding. Our understanding of God matures as the human race develops materially and spiritually under the guidance of God’s Manifestations. Freeing ourselves from these projections opens new possibilities for spiritual, intellectual, artistic and social evolution and, therefore, has an emancipatory function for us. For example, progressive revelation can agree that our images of God can be shaped by our economic relationships, including what Marx refers to as the “relations of production”⁷⁶ i.e., the relationship between those who own the means of production and those who do not. However, when we understand the unknowability of God, we learn to free our images of God from our economically shaped projections and, thereby, free ourselves too from limiting effects of these man-made images. Of course, because of the limitations of human nature, we can never completely free ourselves from these limitations.

The difference between the Bahá'í Faith and Bloch is that the Bahá'í Faith does not regard the rejection of historically inappropriate projections of God as ‘atheism,’ i.e., the ontological non-existence of a non-material transcendental entity Who is the origin of the cosmos. It recognizes that we can accept the Feuerbachian thesis without necessarily adopting atheism. In other words, we do not need to read Feuerbach ontologically – as Bloch sometimes does – as a statement about God’s non-existence; rather, we can read Feuerbach epistemologically, i.e., as a statement about human knowledge and understanding of God. Our knowledge of God is limited but that limitation does not logically imply anything about God’s existence.

The epistemological reading of Bloch’s (and Feuerbach’s) ‘atheism’ can lead to an apophatic theology in which all positive assertions about

74. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

75. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.

76. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Samuel Moore (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), p. 83.

God are, in the last analysis, rejected or at best accepted as a heuristic device as an aid to reflection. But that is all these assertions are since in Himself, God is unknowable, beyond human comprehension. This is close to the position of the Bahá'í Writings.

We speak of the names and attributes of the Divine Reality, and we praise Him by attributing to Him sight, hearing, power, life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections. When we look at the existing world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection; therefore, we say that the sanctified Essence of God is wisdom. . . .⁷⁷

ʿAbdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the inadequacy of our attributions to God – and thereby also opens the way to an apophatic theology in which our ignorance of God in Himself does not become a denial of His existence. Of course, the Writings are not limited to apophaticism since they also require the development of a historically and culturally appropriate positive theology on the basis of what the Manifestations reveal about God. Their revelations about God are the essence of the Bahá'í Faith and are sufficient to provide individual and collective guidance.

We may approach this subject from another angle. If God is unknowable to us, the question arises, 'Does God even exist?' While Feuerbach and subsequently Marx saw the concept of God only as an alienation of our human essence and therefore, rejected it, Bloch, and of course, the Bahá'í Faith do not follow the same path. According to Bloch, the 'space' left by the rejection of the projected God is not empty. For Bloch, God is the horizon or farthest extent of human possibilities, "the *metaphysical* correlate of this projection remains the hidden, the still undefined-undefinitive, the real Possible in the sense of mystery."⁷⁸ It seems that for Bloch, God continues as a "real Possible" for human evolution, as a goal for which to strive. Moreover, this is no man-made, psychologically created God – it is a "real Possible," something with ontological reality of some sort, for as Bloch says, this space occupied by the "real Possible" is not an illusion.⁷⁹

A little reflection helps us realize that a "real Possible" is essentially unknowable because as a 'possibility' it is unlimited and whatever is unlimited is beyond human comprehension. Here, too, Bloch's ideas

77. ʿAbdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.

78. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. III, p. 1199. Emphasis added.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 1295.

harmonize with the Bahá'í Writings. `Abdu'l-Bahá characterizes God in a similar way when he writes:

The very fact that the reality of phenomena is limited well indicates that there must needs be an unlimited reality, for were there no unlimited, or infinite, reality in life, the finite being of objects would be inconceivable.⁸⁰

The concept of God as an unlimited “real Possible” is also compatible with the Bahá'í position that God is omnipotent and absolutely unconstrained since there is no limit to the possible. In other words, Bloch's concept of the “real Possible” goes a long way towards reviving many of the traditional descriptors of God. The “real Possible” is omnipresent, or as Bahá'u'lláh says, “No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it.”⁸¹ He is omniscient – since it is difficult to conceive how a being that can be everywhere cannot know everything. It is free from time i.e. eternal because it does not exist on the phenomenal plane like other particular beings. Finally, it has unity and “singleness”⁸² because there cannot be more than one unlimited “real Possible.” In short, Bloch seems to have re-invented God by a new name, the “real Possible.”

Of course, this concept of God as we have discussed it belongs to what is commonly called “the God of the philosophers”⁸³ as distinct from the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”⁸⁴ The former is more akin to an idea, a necessary ontological concept, whereas the latter is a Someone with Whom we can have a personal relationship, i.e., Who calls for a personal response from us. Bloch's philosophy has little or no room for such a God and, therefore, must always remain incomplete from a theological point-of-view.

The subject of God raises another problem insofar as it highlights the issue of ‘transcendence.’ In the Bahá'í Writings God transcends His creation, because, among other things, He is absolutely independent and everything else is absolutely dependent on Him. Bloch's problem is that his understanding of ‘transcendence’ brings him closer to the spiritual or philosophical idealist position than to materialism. We have already seen this in his view of potentials as real but not susceptible to scientific analysis, and then in the idea that there is a “metaphysical correlate” of

80. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 424.

81. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 178.

82. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 114.

83. Blaise Pascal. <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/pascal.html>.

84. *Ibid.*

the projected God, who is described as a “real Possible.” It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his materialism is severely compromised.

The philosophy of human nature

As we have seen, for Bloch, all beings, including human beings, are a becoming towards the Not-Yet, i.e., towards the future that will develop from the real possibilities inherent in any situation. Thus, for Bloch, human individuals and human history are “a repository of possibilities that are living options for future action.”⁸⁵ These “living options” are what Bloch calls the “fact-based Possible”⁸⁶ which, speaking generally, can be known by rationally studying the components of reality and “their factual relations.”⁸⁷ By observing these components we can deduce some of the inherent possibilities or potentials for the future. These potentials then become the focus of our future-oriented actions.

Because we are evolving beings in an evolving universe, hope is one of the most prominent features of our existence, yet, paradoxically, until Bloch, it was one of the topics least studied by philosophers. Previously, hope had been studied by theologians, who saw it as a subjective response to our external situation and/or our inner spiritual condition. However, Bloch sees it as something more:

Expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become; this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but correctly corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole.⁸⁸

Hope, the teleological forward orientation towards a goal is an objectively, ontologically real aspect of nature, and this aspect of reality manifests itself among humans as ‘hope’ which helps to constitute human consciousness. In other words, hope is more than a subjective response. Hope also has a cognitive function: it allows us to see the real possibilities latent in the world around us, thus orienting present thought and action in light of the future. Consequently, hope and the future shape both the present world and the individuals living in it.⁸⁹ In this sense, the future is present right now.

85. Douglas Kellner, *Ernst Bloch, Utopia and Ideology Critique*. <http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell1.htm>

86. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 229.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Consequently, living authentically, being an authentic human being requires us to understand ourselves as living in hope,⁹⁰ which is, in effect, living with an endless, structurally given hunger.⁹¹ Such hunger is one of the major constitutive features of human existence; it is an “enlightened hunger,”⁹² which preserves the self not only by rebelling against external and internal strictures on authenticity but also by “self-extension,”⁹³ i.e., by actualizing new possibilities in the world and in itself. At the very foundation of human nature is a drive to “fill a hollow space in the striving and longing, to fill something lacking with an external something.”⁹⁴ In other words, as `Abdu'l-Bahá says, humankind is intrinsically “restless and dissatisfied,”⁹⁵ always seeking something more. In a similar vein, Bahá'u'lláh writes that “All men have been created to carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization,”⁹⁶ a statement demonstrating the never ceasing future-oriented impulse that constitutes human nature. Such a future orientation inherently contains a hunger, a dissatisfaction or yearning for something better.

This kind of hunger and the resulting hope is often disguised as day-dreams at the personal level, and as religious and/or mythical visions of ‘heaven,’ paradise, the Golden Age, the golden islands of the Hesperides or even Valhalla. In these visions or dreams, the best possibilities within reality or ourselves are actualized. Whether these visions are portrayed as future states or as memories of a perfect past is less important than the fact that in them we observe “a pre-appearance of the possible Real.”⁹⁷ Rather than flights from reality, they are a glimmering awareness of the real possibilities within the world and us. Bloch calls our dim awareness of the utopian elements a “Not Yet Conscious”⁹⁸ which only sometimes develops into full “anticipatory consciousness”⁹⁹ informing our thoughts and actions. When this occurs, we leave behind the myths and begin to develop plans and even visions for the future, both as individuals and societies; we begin to write constitutions or utopian books and to institute reforms aimed at dignifying peoples’ lives. All these activities are products of the “anticipatory consciousness” which is an essential aspect of the human mind.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

91. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 196.

92. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 76.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

95. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 184.

96. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 215. Emphasis added.

97. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 97.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Let us pause for a moment to consider whether Bloch's views on human nature harmonize with the Bahá'í Writings. We have already noted that the Writings endorse the view that all created things, including human beings, are in the process of actualizing their latent potentials, i.e., their "real possibilities" to use Bloch's terminology. For example, `Abdu'l-Bahá says, "There is brotherhood potential in humanity because all inhabit this earthly globe under the one canopy of heaven."¹⁰⁰ This assertion illustrates what Bloch means by a real possibility. The potential for global harmony, is not based on mere wish or fantasy, but on empirically verifiable facts about our habitation on the same planet and the actualization of all the hidden potentials of that fact.

However, a question remains. Do the Writings have anything that corresponds to Bloch's concept of hunger? The answer is found in one of Bahá'u'lláh's prayers. He refers to God as "my Desire and the Desire of all things."¹⁰¹ If God is our desire, then it follows that we have a hunger for God. Furthermore, if we have a genuine hunger for God and wish to draw near to Him, then we will do what God wishes us to do which is to actualize our various intellectual, social and above all spiritual potentials. Thus, while our 'primary' hunger is for God, our 'mediate' hunger is for the potentials that lie within us. This idea is re-enforced in the same prayer where we read, "my Aim and the Aim of all things." A moment's reflection helps us realize that an 'aim' is something for which we hunger – why else would we aim for something? – and since we hunger or aim for God, we also implicitly hunger for that which God desires for us, i.e., the actualization of our infinite potentials.¹⁰²

Another convergence between the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch is the emphasis on both contemplation or reflection and action. `Abdu'l-Bahá says that "faith compriseth both knowledge and the performance of good deeds."¹⁰³ This makes it clear that "conscious knowledge" is not only for reflection and mediation, important as these are, but is also intended as a basis for action. Knowledge and action are correlates, and each is deficient without the other: actionless knowledge and ignorant action benefit no one. Bloch refers to "theory-practice"¹⁰⁴ in which he rejects static contemplation or theory as incomplete and asserts the "theoretical-practical primacy of true philosophy."¹⁰⁵ In other words, philosophy or,

100. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 129.

101. Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah*, p. 58.

102. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel* (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 17.

103. The Universal House of Justice, 1996, Oct. 22, *Authentication and Authority*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>).

104. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, p. 246.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

more generally, knowledge or cognition, should not be isolated from action.

In my view, Bloch's views on these matters harmonize well with the Bahá'í Writings though we must 'read through' a language more akin to Hegel, Marx and Heidegger than to the Writings. For example, the dim "Not-Yet-Consciousness" or sense of deeper and better potentials available in ourselves and in reality leaves humans inherently restless and unsatisfied in their quest for further development. This portrayal of human nature complements 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of human beings as intrinsically "restless and dissatisfied."¹⁰⁶ Bloch also sees human nature as inherently restless, always seeking new possibilities in our inner and outer environment, and consequently, always anticipating future events. This "Not-Yet-Consciousness" i.e., "anticipatory consciousness" which makes us dissatisfied with the status quo, encourages our independent investigation of truth, an attitude of detachment from everything except the truth¹⁰⁷ and an attitude of willingness to accept new truths or new explanations of truths. It must be emphasized that the truth about things for Bloch and the Writings is not simply what a thing is but also includes currently the real possibilities latent in any thing or situation. This is the all-important aspect of reality and we must never let it out of our sight because without it, the grounds for real, rational hope vanish and we will only get a distorted understanding of reality.

The convergence between the Writings and Bloch on the issue of the human soul is tenuous because the concept of a soul is undeveloped in Bloch's work. Strictly speaking, given his supposed materialism there should be no convergence on this topic at all because the Bahá'í concept of the soul involves its transcendence to the body and matter in general.¹⁰⁸ However, as already observed, Bloch's materialism is highly suspect not only vis-à-vis the ontological existence of potentials, but also vis-à-vis God's existence as "the metaphysical correlate of this projection [of God] remains the hidden, the still undefined-undefinitive, the real Possible in the sense of mystery."¹⁰⁹ Could the personal soul also be a "real Possible" that transcends the material world? Could there also be a hidden "metaphysical correlate" of the projection of the soul? Bahá'u'lláh seems to support this view insofar as He tells us that the soul is a mystery beyond all our particular understandings of it.

106. Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 184.

107. Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 38.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

109. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. III, p. 1199.

Thou hast asked Me concerning the nature of the soul. Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel.¹¹⁰

At this point it is clear that Bloch's philosophy on the subject of the soul is sufficiently ambiguous to be open to different, even contradictory, interpretations. No definitive answer is possible either way and the best that we can do is note that on the subject of the soul, there is a possible convergence.

Bloch's *Principle of Hope* also provides the study of human nature with a universally applicable method of analyzing humanity's cultural products in a positive manner. Because "utopia is always latent in every cultural product,"¹¹¹ we can analyze myth, art, music, literature, film and theater to look for the "cultural or utopian surplus," i.e., for those universal qualities such as a sense of dignity, meaning, freedom, and security, which inform human striving for the future. In this way, Bloch presents himself as the "redemptive reader"¹¹² who saves what is essentially human from the mass of culture-bound particulars. As, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's story of Christ and the dead dog makes clear, Bahá'ís need not depend on Bloch's method to salvage the positive potentials among the signs of the decay of the old world order. This quest for the positive in all things is an integral part of the Bahá'í world-view with its emphasis on establishing a new, more inclusive and more constructive world order. However, by reading Bloch's commentaries especially on social developments and the arts, Bahá'ís may learn additional ways of identifying the constructive, forward-looking elements and potentials.

In Bloch's method of analysis, it is irrelevant whether the art is 'high' or low' ('pop') since traces of the "utopian surplus" can be found even in the 'low' or 'popular' arts. Art, or cultural productions in general, begins in current reality ("the Become") and then develops into more completely developed expressions of the future potentials inherent in reality.¹¹³ In other words, it begins in the contemporary 'Zeitgeist' or 'spirit of the times' and then explicitly or implicitly shows us the way to future developments in society. For Bloch "*Art is a laboratory and also a feast*

110. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 158.

111. David Kaufmann, "Thanks for the Memory: Bloch, Benjamin and the Philosophy of History," in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (New York: Verso, 1970), p. 37.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

113. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, p. 216.

of implemented possibilities."¹¹⁴ The 'implementation' refers to the imaginative extension of the "cultural or utopian surplus" into a completed work of art. The same principles can be applied to cultural analysis.

The foregoing similarities notwithstanding, there is one significant difference between Bloch's and the Bahá'í Writings' philosophy of human nature: transcendence. According to the Writings human beings have both an animal and spiritual nature; because it transcends the animal nature, the spiritual nature, the soul, is able to control our lower proclivities as it strives towards God by trying to actualize its spiritual potentials. In other words, human lives are not entirely immanent in the natural, material world; even when we die, we pass into a transcendent spiritual realm where our evolution continues. Bloch's views on this issue, as we have seen above, are ambivalent, amenable to interpretations that both support and deny the existence of a 'transcendent' aspect of human nature.

Conclusion

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this survey comparison of the Bahá'í Writings and Ernst Bloch. The first is that they share significant similarities and/or convergences in their fundamental ontology, their belief in the importance of religion, and their understanding of human nature. Consequently, further investigation into this subject is worthwhile since this study is only an initial reconnaissance. Further studies have an intrinsic value for those interested in learning in what ways and to what degree the Bahá'í Writings relate and speak to the concepts advanced by the various leaders of thought in the time for which the Writings were revealed.

Secondly, we conclude that further investigation into correlating the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch is important because doing so opens the door to dialogue with such highly influential Christian theologians as Jurgen Moltmann. His widely-read *Theology of Hope* which is explicitly based on Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, sparked the "theology of hope" movement in contemporary Christianity. Knowledge of Bloch is also useful in Bahá'í teaching work among people from a left-wing background. Bloch's language and references are already familiar and meaningful to them and this makes it easier for them to follow his arguments, especially when these lead into the direction of the Faith. The differences with Bloch's philosophy and his application of it in the world

114. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

of politics should not blind us to what is valuable and useable in it. Let us recall `Abdu'l-Bahá and the dead dog.

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Macrocriticism: A Comparison of Nicolai Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi

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Introductory observations

Some perceptive authors¹ have recognized points of similarities between the writings of Nicolai Berdyaev² (1874-1948) and the corpus of the Bahá'í Faith but, as this article will show, more work needs to be done in this field.

While Colin Chant states that Berdyaev is “the most widely read of the Russian religious philosophers,”³ Oliver Fielding Clarke writes that Berdyaev “is *par excellence* the Christian philosopher.”⁴ Boris Jakim even refers to Berdyaev as “one of the greatest religious thinkers of the 20th century.”⁵ Yet, his biographers have not noticed the recognition of Berdyaev as a major macrocritic of the twentieth century.

Although *Encyclopedia Britannica* has an entry on Shoghi Rabbaní Effendi⁶ (1897-1957), his “religious thinking” has not been acknowledged *outside* of the Bahá'í community. Even *within* the Bahá'í Community, Shoghi Effendi is mainly

1. Mikhail Sergeev, “The Sophiology of Nicholas Berdyaev and the Bahá'í Teachings,” presentation made at the annual conference of the American Academy of Religion, New Orleans, November 1996. Ian Kluge, *The Call into Being: Introduction to Baha'i Existentialism*. 2002, www.bahaiphilosophystudies.com/articles/?p=21

2. Also spelled Nicolas or Nikolay, and Berdyayev or Berdiaev.

3. S. Brown, D. Collinson, and R. Wilkinson, eds. *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 62.

4. Oliver Fielding Clarke, *Introduction to Berdyaev* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1950), p. 6, italics original.

5. Boris Jakim, “A Brief Overview of Nikolai Berdyaev’s Life and Works,” in N. Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History* (Berkeley, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), p. 225. S. Brown, D. Collinson, and R. Wilkinson, eds., *Biographical Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Philosophers* (London: Routledge, 1996) has an entry on Berdyaev.

6. Shoghi Effendi was born Shoghi Rabbaní. Effendi is a title of respect that means “Sir.”

known as a religious *leader* (“Guardian of the Cause of God”)⁷ and his role as a *major macrocritic* of the twentieth century has not been fully recognized.⁸

Before we delve into the field of macrocriticism a few words should be said about the similarities and differences of the lives of Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi.

On a geopolitical and historical level Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi both lived through crumbling and chaotic empires. Berdyaev was born during the nineteenth-century Russian and Tsarist Empire and lived through its end during WWI and the Bolshevik Revolutions of 1917. Berdyaev further witnessed the establishment of the Soviet Union in 1922 and the reign of Stalinism until his death in Paris in 1948. Shoghi Effendi was born in ‘Akka, Palestine, and witnessed not only the rule of the British Mandate in Palestine (1920) but also the end of the Ottoman Empire in 1922. Shoghi Effendi also experienced the dismantling of the British Mandate in 1948 and the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 until his sudden death in London in 1957.

Another similarity is that Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi were both exiles. Berdyaev was imprisoned in 1898 for his participating in an anti-governmental student demonstration and in 1901-1902 he was exiled to Vologda. His final expulsion, however, was in 1922 when Lenin finally put him – together with 160 other intellectuals – on the “philosopher’s ship.” After that he lived two years in Berlin (where he established a Religio-Philosophic Academy) but eventually settled down in Paris in 1924 and where he lived during the rest of his life. Besides working for the YMCA and working as an editor for a journal in Paris, what it is important to notice is that all his major works were written in exile. Shoghi Effendi, on the other hand, was never imprisoned, but he was a descendant of Iranian exiles (the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) where the former had been imprisoned and executed and the latter had both been imprisoned and banished several times during their lives.⁹ Although Shoghi Effendi had studied in Lebanon/Syria, and the UK, he traveled several times to Europe (mainly Switzerland and France) and traveled twice through the continent of Africa, but he never visited Iran.

Other similarities are that both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi were deeply religious and prolific writers. Linguistically too, Berdyaev spoke Russian, German and French and Shoghi Effendi was fluent in Persian, Arabic, English and French. Even though Berdyaev was a Marxist for a brief period he was a critical Russian Orthodox and refers to himself a “Christian socialist.”¹⁰ In his youth Shoghi Ef-

7. www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/541427/Shoghi-Effendi-Rabbani, *Encyclopaedia Britannica online*.

8. For an in-depth discussion on this theme, see my forthcoming PhD dissertation: Zaid Lundberg, *Ominous Signs of End Times: Shoghi Effendi’s Macrocritique, Apocalyptic Jeremiad, and Rhetorical Vision as Theodicy in the Age of Catastrophe* (Lund: Lund Univ. Press, 2012).

9. E.g., W. S. Hatcher, & J. D. Martin, *The Bahá’í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 28-56.

10. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time* (1924) (Berkeley, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), p. 204.

fendi was studying in different Christian schools¹¹ but he was literally raised in the Bahá'í Faith and, from 1922 until his death in 1957, he was its appointed leader. Although Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi entered matrimony, both their marriages remained childless.

In comparing Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi it is also important to note some differences. Berdyaev was an intellectual academic,¹² a philosopher and a theologian. Shoghi Effendi, although educated at Oxford,¹³ was primarily a full-time religious leader. Whereas Berdyaev wrote about 50 books and numerous articles, Shoghi Effendi only published two books.¹⁴ Yet, it should be mentioned that Shoghi Effendi translated some of the major works by Bahá'u'lláh and the Báb¹⁵ and, most importantly in the context of this article, is that he wrote about 16,000-26,000 letters to Bahá'ís around the globe.¹⁶ Some of these letters have subsequently been compiled and published as books.¹⁷

Yet, as this article will show, Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi were also major macro-critics of the twentieth century and the main purpose of this article is to show that their macro critique are not only comparable but also, in many respects, similar.

Macrocriticism

Macrocriticism is a neologism and an umbrella term for the following theoretical¹⁸ areas of criticism: *Cultural* criticism, including concepts like “counter-culture”¹⁹ and “cultural pessimism”²⁰; *Social* criticism²¹; and *Civilizational* criti-

11. In Haifa he attended Collège des Frères (a French Jesuit school) and in Beirut he studied at the Syrian Protestant College (later known as the American University of Beirut).

12. Chair of Philosophy at the University of Moscow although he never earned an official degree.

13. Riaz Khadem, *Shoghi Effendi in Oxford* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1999).

14. *God Passes By* (1944) (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979) is the only book that Shoghi Effendi wrote in English. He also composed a shorter version of it in Persian, known as *Lawh-i-Qawm*.

15. Morten Bergsmo, ed., *Studying the Writings of Shoghi Effendi* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1991), pp. 29-30.

16. Ibid, p. 25. These letters were privately addressed to individuals or collectively addressed to local, national assemblies and Bahá'í communities.

17. E.g., *The Promised Day is Come* (1941) (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), which is about 100 pages in length, and *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh – Selected Letters* (1929-36) (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991), which is a collection of major letters sent to North America.

18. I state that these areas are “theoretical” since in practice, i.e., in the actual texts, these areas are intermingled.

19. Theodor Roszak *The Making of a Counter Culture: Reflections on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1968).

20. Oliver Bennett, *Cultural Pessimism: Narratives of Decline in the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2001).

21. Michael Walzer *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), and *The Company of Critics: Social Criticism and Political Commitment in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1988).

cism.²² It also includes related areas such as *Anti-modernism*²³; *Orientalism/Occidentalism*²⁴; *Postcolonial* criticism²⁵; *Dystopianism*²⁶; *Counter-Enlightenment*²⁷; *Eco* criticism²⁸ and *Gender* criticism.²⁹ In other words, macrocriticism is a field that looks at critique directed not only at *one* aspect or dimension of a social entity (technology, politics, economics, ecology, etc), but it includes *several* dimensions or critique directed towards “society-at-large” or “the-world-at-large.”

In my readings of both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi, and inspired by Kenneth Burke’s concept of the “Pentad,”³⁰ I have divided the field of macrocriticism into five dimensions or clusters:

- 1) The World/Society/Civilization³¹;
 - 2) History/The Age/Times;
 - 3) Mankind/Humanity;
 - 4) Progress/Science/Technology;
 - 5) Ethics/Religion/Secularization.
- This paper is delimited to dimensions 1, 2 and 5.³²

The World/Society/Civilization

Although it should be clear that all dimensions or clusters of macrocriticism are intimately intertwined in the actual texts, the identification of five clusters is used here as a theoretical and heuristic device. For example, Berdyaev’s expression

22. John Zerzan, *Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2005).

23. T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983).

24. E. W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978). I. Buruma, & A. Margalit *Occidentalism: A Short History of Anti-Westernism* (London: Atlantic Books, 2004).

25. B. J. Moore-Gilbert, G. Stanton, & W. Maley, eds., *Postcolonial Criticism* (Harlow Essex: Longman, 1997).

26. M. K. Booker, *The Dystopian Impulse in Modern Literature: Fiction as Social Criticism* (London: Greenwood Press, 1994).

27. Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 1979).

28. C. Glotfelty & H. Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (London: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1996).

29. Judith Spector, ed., *Gender Studies: New Directions in Feminist Criticism* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State Univ. Popular Press, 1986). In this article I will focus only on Cultural, Social, and Civilizational criticism.

30. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1945). Burke’s “Pentad” is inspired from Dramatism and includes the following five areas and questions: 1) scene (Where is the act happening?), 2) act (What happened?), 3) agent (Who is involved in the action?), 4) agency (How do the agents act?), and 5) purpose (Why do the agents act?).

31. This dimension also includes such areas as continents and countries.

32. For a more detailed description of these dimensions/clusters, see my forthcoming PhD dissertation.

“this doomed world of modern times”³³ and Shoghi Effendi’s concept of a “New World Order” have both a temporal and spatial dimension. Yet, it is possible to locate passages in the writings of both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi where they directly criticize *the state of the world*, or *society-at-large*, or *civilization*. Sometimes they are more specific in their criticism, which they direct towards e.g., the West/East, certain continents, empires and countries. Berdyaev writes, for example, in 1923 of “the calamities which not only *Russia* but the whole of *Europe* and of *the whole world* have undergone.”³⁴ In lengthier passage from the same year Berdyaev describes “The old worn-out world to which we can never go back” as a world of rationalist prophets, of individualism and Humanism, Liberalism and democratic theories, of imposing national monarchies and imperialist politics, of a monstrous economic system compounded of Industrialism and Capitalism, of vast technical apparatus, of exterior conquests and practical achievements; a world of unbridled and endless covetousness in its public life, of atheism and supreme disdain for the soul, and, at last, of Socialism, the end and crown of all contemporary history. We gladly echo the words of the revolutionary song, “Down with the old world!” – but we understand by that term this doomed world of modern times.³⁵

In another passage Berdyaev writes that the “world is in confusion” and that it tends towards the construction of a spiritual order analogous to that of the Middle Ages. Decay precedes a middle age, and it is needful to mark the course of those elements that are dying and those that are coming to birth. . . Individualism, the “atomization” of society, the inordinate acquisitiveness of the world, indefinite over-population and the endlessness of people’s needs, the lack of faith, the weakening of spiritual life, these and other are the causes which have contributed to build up that industrial capitalist system which has change the face of human life and broken its rhythm with nature. The power of the machine and the chronic “speeding-up” that it involves have created myths and phantoms and directed man’s life towards these figments which, nevertheless, give an impression of being more real than realities . . . monstrous manufactories of useless things or of weapons for the destruction of life, in the ostentation of their luxury . . . The whole economic system of Capitalism is an offshoot of a devouring and overwhelming lust . . . It is the result of a secularization of economic life, and by it the hierarchical subordination of the material to the spiritual is inverted. The autonomy of economics has ended in their dominating the whole life of human societies: the worship of Mammon has become the determining force of the age.³⁶

Berdyaev’s critique of the world in these two passages are good examples of macrocritique since he enumerates not only *one* area of society but a very wide range of critique: individualism and humanism, liberalism, industrialism and capi-

33. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, pp. 78-79.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 75-76, italics added.

35. *Ibid.*, pp. 78-79.

36. *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.

talism, atheism, secularization and the lack of faith, socialism, over-population, weapons of destruction, luxury, etc. Although Berdyaev singles out a few political-economic systems above, he writes elsewhere “*All systems* of ideas and political and social forms throughout the world are going through a period of crisis. They are all in practice worn out and there is no longer anything that rouses the enthusiasm of civilized peoples.”³⁷

As early as 1923 Shoghi Effendi elaborates on the “Condition of the World” where he describes the world as being in a state of cataclysm. In another letter from the same year he writes of “world’s evil plight” and “the ever-increasing confusion of the world, threatened as never before with disruptive forces, fierce rivalries, fresh commotions and grave disorder.”³⁸ In the same compilation of letters Shoghi Effendi writes of “these days of world-encircling gloom, when the dark forces of nature, of hate, rebellion, anarchy and reaction are threatening the very stability of human society, when the most precious fruits of civilization are undergoing severe and unparalleled tests.”³⁹

In a letter of 1934 Shoghi Effendi writes, “The world is drawing nearer and nearer to a universal catastrophe which will mark the end of a bankrupt and of a fundamentally defective civilization.”⁴⁰ In another passage from 1936 Shoghi Effendi writes:

As we view the world around us, we are compelled to observe the manifold evidences of that universal fermentation which, in every continent of the globe and in every department of human life, be it religious, social, economic or political, is purging and reshaping humanity in anticipation of the Day when the wholeness of the human race will have been recognized and its unity established. A twofold process, however, can be distinguished, each tending, in its own way and with an accelerated momentum, to bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet.⁴¹

Like Berdyaev, Shoghi Effendi also states that the crisis of the world is not limited to a specific compartment but it is truly macroscopic (global) and pervasive. Hence he writes that it is in “every continent of the globe and in every department of human life” and that it also includes the “religious, social, economic or political.”

Other passages in the writings of both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi testify to a critique towards specific continents, empires and countries. For example, Ber-

37. *Ibid.*, p. 200, italics added.

38. Shoghi Effendi (1922-32) *Bahá’í Administration* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974), p. 50.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

40. Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. 1 (1922-39) (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’í-Verlag, 1982), p. 53.

41. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 169.

dyaev states that “Europe is spending her strength extravagantly, she is exhausted”⁴² and that “We are now taking part in the beginnings of the barbarization of Europe.”⁴³ Similarly, Shoghi Effendi is highly critical towards especially the Qájar Dynasty in Iran and its “Unbridled Barbarism”⁴⁴ and the Ottoman Empire (which he calls “The Ottoman Ramshackle”).⁴⁵ Shoghi Effendi,⁴⁶ and especially Berdyaev, also directs relentless critique towards Russia and the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

Although Shoghi Effendi is generally praising especially North America, he also highly critical towards its “excessive and enervating materialism” which is “now prevailing in their country”⁴⁸ and the “racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century, has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society.”⁴⁹ He further criticizes North America for its “corrupt and pleasure-seeking generation,” “the deceitfulness and corruption that characterize the political life of the nation and of the parties and factions that compose it,” and “the moral laxity and licentiousness which defile the character of a not inconsiderable proportion of its citizens.”⁵⁰

Ethics/Religion/Secularization

This dimension of cluster of macrocriticism looks at the critique directed towards ethics/morality as well as critique directed towards religious *and* secular ideologies and institutions (or the process of secularization). Above it was stated that Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi were deeply religious authors, yet it will be seen that they also direct sharp critique towards religious institutions. We will start by looking at Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi’s critique towards ethics/morality, and then continue with their critique towards religion, secularization and secular ideologies.

In the spirit of macrocritique Berdyaev writes that “The decline and crisis of humanism are likewise manifest in the sphere of *moral life*” and that “There can be no shadow of doubt that we are living in an epoch marked by *the bankruptcy of that humanist morality* which had been the guiding light of modern history.” But Berdyaev goes on to write “the close of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries [have] demonstrated its final collapse. The Great War in par-

42. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 27.

43. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

44. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 133-34.

45. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 62.

46. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 160.

47. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, pp. 209-58.

48. Shoghi Effendi (1939), *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), pp. 16-17.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 19.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

ticular, and its lasting consequences, dealt a death-blow to its illusions.”⁵¹ Writing about the dehumanization and “the mechanization of human life, turning man into a machine” Berdyaev also writes, “This proves that the whole of our social organism is afflicted with a terrible spiritual and *moral disease*, a truly bestial attitude of man to man.”⁵²

Similarly, Shoghi Effendi distinguishes between “The signs of moral downfall, as distinct from the evidences of decay in religious institutions.” In this passage, entitled “Signs of Moral Downfall,” Shoghi Effendi elaborates on “The perversion of human nature, the degradation of human conduct,” and he goes on to write that when “the light of religion is quenched in men's hearts” then human character is debased, confidence is shaken, the nerves of discipline are relaxed, the voice of human conscience is stilled, the sense of decency and shame is obscured, conceptions of duty, of solidarity, of reciprocity and loyalty are distorted, and the very feeling of peacefulness, of joy and of hope is gradually extinguished.⁵³

Shoghi Effendi continues in this passage to enumerate several areas of macrocriticism, which are all pertinent to the ethical dimension (or the effects of irreligious life):

The recrudescence of religious intolerance, of racial animosity, and of patriotic arrogance; the increasing evidences of selfishness, of suspicion, of fear and of fraud; the spread of terrorism, of lawlessness, of drunkenness and of crime; the unquenchable thirst for, and the feverish pursuit after, earthly vanities, riches and pleasures; the weakening of family solidarity; the laxity in parental control; the lapse into luxurious indulgence; the irresponsible attitude towards marriage and the consequent rising tide of divorce; the degeneracy of art and music, the infection of literature, and the corruption of the press; the extension of the influence and activities of those “prophets of decadence” who advocate companionate marriage, who preach the philosophy of nudism, who call modesty an intellectual fiction, who refuse to regard the procreation of children as the sacred and primary purpose of marriage, who denounce religion as an opiate of the people, who would, if given free rein, lead back the human race to barbarism, chaos, and ultimate extinction.⁵⁴

When it comes to a critique of religion Berdyaev writes, “Our time is a time of spiritual decadence, not of ascent”⁵⁵ and that modern man “has lost his eternal

51. Nicolai Berdyaev (1923), *The Meaning of History* (Berkeley, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), p. 166, italics and clarification added.

52. Nicolai Berdyaev (1934), *The Fate of Man in the Modern World* (Berkeley, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), p. 81, italics added.

53. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 187.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 187-88.

55. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 15.

spiritual bearings and so there he is today – a prey to the devastating forces of our time.”⁵⁶ Berdyaev even states, “Man without God is no longer man.”⁵⁷

In several places in his writings Berdyaev refers to the “decaying West” as “a soulless and atheistic civilization,”⁵⁸ that “Modern capitalist civilization is essentially atheistic and hostile to the idea of God” and that “The crime of killing God must be laid at its [modern capitalist civilization] door rather than at that of revolutionary socialism.”⁵⁹

In a lengthier passage Berdyaev clarifies the difference between the atheism of socialism and capitalism:

The popularity of pragmatism in America, the classical land of civilization, need cause no surprise. Socialism, on the other hand, repudiated pragmatical religion; but it pragmatically defends atheism as being more useful for the development of life forces and worldly satisfaction of the larger masses of mankind. But the pragmatical and utilitarian approach of Capitalism had been the real source of atheism and spiritual bankruptcy.⁶⁰

In a later work Berdyaev writes about the “wolf-like life of capitalist society” and “the false civilization of capitalism.”⁶¹ Besides criticizing socialism and capitalism Berdyaev is critical towards “all Communists, all Fascists, all National-Socials and all others possessed by the demon of the will to power” since “In the dictatorial states, fascist or communist, there is a development of thirst for power and violence, a desire for bloodshed and cruelty.”⁶² Yet, it is important to notice that Berdyaev states that:

From the Christian point of view, Hitlerism [Nazism] is more dangerous than Communism, since the latter struggles openly and directly against Christianity as against all religion, while Hitlerism demands a violent deformation of Christianity from within, altering the Christian faith itself in favour of the racialist theory and the dictatorship of the Third Reich.⁶³

In addition to writing about socialism, capitalism, fascism and Nazism, Berdyaev also writes about “The pagan tendencies of our times.”⁶⁴

56. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

58. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, pp. 207, 208, 218.

59. *Ibid.*, p. 218, clarification added.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 219.

61. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, pp. 15-16, 18.

62. *Ibid.*, pp. 45, 47. See also pp. 60-64.

63. *Ibid.*, p. 102, clarification added.

64. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 36.

On the one hand Berdyaev writes that “Christianity is the greatest of religions”⁶⁵ and that “Christianity has gone on living in man in a secularized form” and “it is she [Christianity] who has kept him from disintegrating completely.”⁶⁶ On the other hand Berdyaev also writes about “the failure of Christianity” which is not “the failure of God, as the adversaries of Christianity maintain, but of man.”⁶⁷ Thus, he writes, “Europe has not made its Christianity real, but has distorted and betrayed it.”⁶⁸ In a later work Berdyaev writes, “. . . now Christianity, in its old age, is old and burdened, with a long history in which Christians have often sinned and betrayed their ideal.”⁶⁹ He continues to write that “All too often Christianity has been anti-human” and that “The religion of love and mercy has been transformed into a proclamation of cruel and relentless attitudes toward men.”⁷⁰

Whereas Berdyaev writes of spirituality/religion in general and of Christianity in particular, Shoghi Effendi writes of religion in general, and he specifically writes about the decline of Christianity *and* Islam. As an example of the first case Shoghi Effendi writes of “an unbelieving world”⁷¹ and of “the decline of religion as a social force, of which the deterioration of religious institutions is but an external phenomenon, is chiefly responsible for so grave, so conspicuous an evil.”⁷²

In that same work Shoghi Effendi writes that:

. . . the forces of irreligion, of a purely materialistic philosophy, of unconcealed paganism have been unloosed, are now spreading, and, by consolidating themselves, are beginning to invade some of the most powerful Christian institutions of the western world, no unbiased observer can fail to admit.⁷³

Shoghi Effendi thus seems to be in agreement with Berdyaev of the resurging paganism. Shoghi Effendi continues to write, “the chill of irreligion creeps relentlessly over the soul of mankind”⁷⁴ and that the “forces of irreligion are weakening the moral fiber, and undermining the foundations of individual morality.”⁷⁵ Hence Shoghi Effendi sees an intimate relation between ethics/morality and religion. In another work and in a lengthy passage, Shoghi Effendi writes of the results of “A world, dimmed by the steadily dying-out light of religion” as heaving with the ex-

65. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, p. 72.

66. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 27, clarification added.

67. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, pp. 200-01.

68. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 61.

69. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, p. 23.

70. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

71. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 34.

72. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 186.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 180.

74. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 25.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 29.

plosive forces of a blind and triumphant nationalism; scorched with the fires of pitiless persecution, whether racial or religious; deluded by the false theories and doctrines that threaten to supplant the worship of God and the sanctification of His laws; enervated by a rampant and brutal materialism; disintegrating through the corrosive influence of moral and spiritual decadence; and enmeshed in the coils of economic anarchy and strife -- such is the spectacle presented to men's eyes, as a result of the sweeping changes which this revolutionizing Force, as yet in the initial stage of its operation, is now producing in the life of the entire planet.⁷⁶

More specifically, Shoghi Effendi writes of Islam and Christianity. For example he writes of "The Decline of Islam"⁷⁷ and the "Collapse of Islam"⁷⁸ as well as the "Deterioration of Christian Institutions."⁷⁹ In Islam this process includes both "The collapse of the power of the Shi'ih hierarchy"⁸⁰ as well as "The overthrow of the Sultanate and the Caliphate, the twin pillars of Sunni Islam."⁸¹ With regard to Christianity Shoghi Effendi writes of the "de-Christianization of the masses," "a notable decline in the authority, the prestige and power of the Church"⁸² and that the "Christian Religion . . . has now fallen into such a state of impotence."⁸³ Continuing to write about "the rapid dechristianization of the masses in many Christian countries" Shoghi Effendi surveys "the fortunes of Christian ecclesiastical orders" as follows:

. . . to appreciate the steady deterioration of their influence, the decline of their power, the damage to their prestige, the flouting of their authority, the dwindling of their congregations, the relaxation of their discipline, the restriction of their press, the timidity of their leaders, the confusion in their ranks, the progressive confiscation of their properties, the surrender of some of their most powerful strongholds, and the extinction of other ancient and cherished institutions.⁸⁴

Shoghi Effendi is especially critical towards Christianity during World War II:

What a sorry spectacle of impotence and disruption does this fratricidal war, which Christian nations are waging against Christian nations – Anglicans pitted against Lutherans, Catholics against Greek Orthodox, Catholics against Catholics, and Protestants against Protestants – in support of a so-called

76. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

77. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 169.

78. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 97.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

80. *Ibid.*, p. 172.

81. *Ibid.*, p. 173.

82. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 185.

84. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, pp. 103-04.

Christian civilization, offer to the eyes of those who are already perceiving the bankruptcy of the institutions that claim to speak in the name, and to be the custodians, of the Faith of Jesus Christ!⁸⁵

Writing on the phenomenon of secularization Berdyaev writes of “the secularization of society at large.”⁸⁶ More elaborately he states “Science, art, political and economic life, society and culture now become autonomous” and that this “processes of differentiation is synonymous with the secularization of human culture. Even religion is secularized. Art and science, the state and society, enter the modern world along a secular path.” Continuing on this theme Berdyaev writes:

The bonds holding together the various spheres of social and cultural life now become relaxed, and these spheres become independent. That is the essential character of modern history. The transition from mediaeval to modern history is synonymous with one from the divine to the human aspects of the world, from the divine depths, interior concentration and the inner core, to an exterior cultural manifestation. This divorce from the spiritual depths, in which man’s forces had been stored and to which they had been inwardly bound, is accompanied not only by their liberation, but by their passage from the depths to the periphery and the surface of human life, from the mediaeval religious to secular culture; and it implies the transference of the centre of gravity from the divine depths to purely human creation. The spiritual bond with the centre of life grows gradually weaker. Modern history therefore conducts European man along a path, which removes him ever further from the spiritual centre. It is the path of man’s free experience and the trial of his creative forces.⁸⁷

In a later work Berdyaev writes that “Apostasy from the Christian faith, abandonment of spiritual principles and disregard of the spiritual ends of life, must necessarily lead first to the stage called Capitalism and then to the stage called Socialism.”⁸⁸

Although it was seen above that Berdyaev is more positive towards socialism than capitalism he also writes that “The worship of Mammon instead of God is a characteristic of Socialism as well as of Capitalism”⁸⁹ and that “The socialist state . . . is a government by Satan.”⁹⁰ To further clarify Berdyaev’s view on communism he describes it as “anti-individualist, anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-

85. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

86. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 84.

87. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, pp. 130-31. See also Berdyaev’s *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, p. 70.

88. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 192.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 192.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 191.

humanist,” that it is “hierarchical in its way; it denies modern formal liberties and equalities and builds up its satanist order of subordination,” and that it is “a false church, a communion of lies.”⁹¹

Shoghi Effendi similarly, writes of “the slow and hidden process of secularisation” that is “invading many a government department under the courageous guidance of the Governors of outlying provinces” and he continues to state that “in all of these a discerning eye can easily discover the symptoms that augur well for a future that is sure to witness the formal and complete separation of Church and State.”⁹² In a later work Shoghi Effendi writes of “the wave of secularisation,”⁹³ “the rising tide of secularism”⁹⁴ and the “menace of secularism” that has attacked Islam and is undermining its remaining institutions, that has invaded Persia, has penetrated into India, and raised its triumphant head in Turkey, has already manifested itself in both Europe and America, and is, in varying degrees, and under various forms and designations, challenging the basis of every established religion, and in particular the institutions and communities identified with the Faith of Jesus Christ. It would be no exaggeration to say that we are moving into a period, which the future historian will regard as one of the most critical in the history of Christianity.⁹⁵

Thus, it is important to notice that although both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi are writing of the social pervasiveness and its global spread of secularisation, Shoghi Effendi states that it is challenging not only Christianity and Islam but “the basis of every established religion” and he also writes of “a world . . . whose religious systems have become anemic and lost their virtue.”⁹⁶ It is because these processes that Shoghi Effendi also writes that “the lights of religion are fading out,”⁹⁷ and that “the bright flame of religion is fast dying out.”⁹⁸ More specifically, Shoghi Effendi sees a relationship between secularism and irreligion in that “flagrant secularism” is “the direct offspring of irreligion.”⁹⁹ In the same work Shoghi Effendi continues to write of “irreligion and its monstrous offspring” as a “triple curse that oppresses the soul of mankind in this day . . . responsible for the ills which are so tragically besetting it . . .”¹⁰⁰ Shoghi Effendi identifies this triple curse as “The chief idols in the desecrated temple of mankind” which are none other than the triple gods of Nationalism, Racialism and Communism, at whose altars governments and peoples, whether democratic or totalitarian, at peace or at

91. *Ibid.*, p. 110.

92. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 148.

93. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 229-30.

94. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 186.

95. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

96. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

97. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 29.

98. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 16.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

100. *Ibid.*, p.114.

war, of the East or of the West, Christian or Islamic, are, in various forms and in different degrees, now worshipping. Their high priests are the politicians and the worldly-wise, the so-called sages of the age; their sacrifice, the flesh and blood of the slaughtered multitudes; their incantations outworn shibboleths and insidious and irreverent formulas; their incense, the smoke of anguish that ascends from the lacerated hearts of the bereaved, the maimed, and the homeless.¹⁰¹

In the same work Shoghi Effendi enumerates another set of forces as “the forces of nationalism, paganism, secularism and racialism.”¹⁰² Berdyaev also writes that “Racialism is worse than communism since its ideology includes eternal hatred; communism, on the other hand, decrees hatred as a way. . . .”¹⁰³ and he further writes, “Racialism is a ruder form of materialism.”¹⁰⁴ Berdyaev also writes that “Modern nationalism bears marks of bestial inhumanity,” that “nationalism and racialism are worse than communism” and that “modern Nationalism means the dehumanisation and bestialization of human societies.”¹⁰⁵

Thus, whereas Berdyaev identifies communism and capitalism as responsible for the rise of materialism and atheism (and other social ills) he clearly sees capitalism, Nazism, nationalism and racialism as greater evils. Yet, Berdyaev ultimately admits that “The roots of all this must be sought in the plane of the spiritual, in the crisis of Christianity and of religious consciousness in general, in the decline of spirituality.”¹⁰⁶ Thus, according to Berdyaev “De-christianization led to dehumanization.”¹⁰⁷

Although Shoghi Effendi writes of “unbridled capitalism”¹⁰⁸ he also states “There is nothing in the teachings against some kind of capitalism.”¹⁰⁹ Another difference is that whereas Berdyaev is highly critical towards both fascism and Nazism, Shoghi Effendi just mentions them in passing.¹¹⁰

Their macrocritical emphasis is thus somewhat different but both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi identify the following modern phenomena as conjointly evil and responsible for, or as manifestations of, social ills or crises: nationalism, racism, paganism, secularism/atheism and communism (capitalism).

Despite all the critique towards religion and, particularly Christianity, Berdyaev also writes that “There is no possibility of a perfect society and a perfect

101. *Ibid.*

102. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

103. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, p. 29.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 98.

105. *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 83. See also p. 107.

106. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

107. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

108. Shoghi Effendi (1947-57), *Citadel of Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 154.

109. Shoghi Effendi qtd in Helen Hornby, ed., *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994), p. 550.

110. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, pp. 36-37.

culture without . . . real spiritual life, that is, without a religious rebirth.”¹¹¹ Thus, Berdyaev believes that “Christianity is coming back to its pre-Constantinian situation . . . that is the position in which the Russian Orthodox Church is already” while admitting that “It may well be that Christians are being called to go further back yet, to the catacombs, and from there to conquer the world anew.”¹¹² Berdyaev consequently writes that “modern history” on the one hand “draws to an end,” while “giving place to a new era” which he refers to as “a new Christian renaissance.”¹¹³ Thus, Berdyaev writes that “Only Christianity holds the resolution to the problem of the relationship of man and God, only in Christ is the image of man preserved, only within the Christian spirit are there created both society and culture, non-destructive to man.”¹¹⁴ In a later work Berdyaev states that “Only in the second coming of Christ, in the form of Christ, the coming One, will the perfection of man appear in its fullness.”¹¹⁵ In this context of Christian renaissance it is significant that Berdyaev also schematically portrays “four periods or states in man’s historical destiny” as “barbarism, culture, civilization and religious transfiguration.”¹¹⁶

Rather than looking *back* to a pristine state of Christianity, or looking *forward* to the Second Coming of Christ, Shoghi Effendi views the Bahá'í Faith “in the course of its sure yet toilsome march towards the salvation of the world”¹¹⁷ and he endorses Bahá'u'lláh's (the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith) claim as *the fulfillment* of the Second Coming of Christ, the Judge, the Lawgiver and Redeemer of all mankind, as the Organizer of the entire planet, as the Unifier of the children of men, as the Inaugurator of the long-awaited millennium, as the Originator of a new “Universal Cycle,” as the Establisher of the Most Great Peace, as the Fountain of the Most Great Justice, as the Proclaimer of the coming of age of the entire human race, as the Creator of a new World Order, and as the Inspirer and Founder of a world civilization.¹¹⁸

History/The Age/Times

This final dimension or cluster of macrocriticism is critique directed towards the *Zeitgeist* or the Spirit of the Age. It is significant that both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi refer to the epochal changes by using *volcanic* metaphors. For exam-

111. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 199.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 201.

113. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, p. 181.

114. Nicolai Berdyaev (1932), “The Spiritual Condition of the Contemporary World,” *Put'*, no. 35 (Sept. 1932): 68.

115. Nicolai Berdyaev (1941), *The Beginning and the End* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1957), p. 250.

116. *Ibid.*, p. 222.

117. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 60.

118. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, pp. 93-94.

ple, in 1923 – four years after World War I and six years after the Russian revolutions – Berdyaev writes that:

There can be little doubt, I think, that not only Russia but Europe and the world as a whole are now entering upon *a catastrophic period* of their development. We are living at a *time of immense crisis, on the threshold of a new era*. The very structure or historical development has suffered a profound change. It is now essentially different from what it was prior to the World War and the Russia and the European revolutions. This change can only be regarded as catastrophic. *Volcanic sources* have opened in the historical substrata. Everything is tottering, and we have the impression of a particularly intense and acute movement of historical forces.¹¹⁹

In 1924 Berdyaev writes in a similar vein that “It would indeed seem that *the old, secular foundations of the West are trembling*, things apparently stabilized by use and wont are shifting. Nowhere and in no single matter is solid earth felt underfoot: *we are on volcanic ground* and any eruption is possible, material or spiritual.”¹²⁰

A year before (1923) Shoghi Effendi writes that:

Four years of unprecedented warfare and *world cataclysms* followed by another four years of bitter disappointment and suffering, have stirred deeply the conscience of mankind, and opened the eyes of an unbelieving world to the Power of the Spirit that alone can cure its sicknesses, heal its wounds.¹²¹

Berdyaev continues to write in 1924:

. . . the world is undergoing *a gigantic revolution*; not the communist revolution which, at bottom is everything that is most reactionary, a mess of all *the rotten elements of the old world*, but a true spiritual revolution. To call to a new middle age is a call to this spiritual revolution, to a complete renewal of consciousness.¹²²

In 1931 Shoghi Effendi writes of “*that transformation of unparalleled majesty and scope* which humanity is in this age bound to undergo. That the forces of a *world catastrophe* can alone precipitate such a *new phase* of human thought is,

119. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, pp. 1-3, italics added. See also p. 168 and Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 12.

120. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 12, italics added.

121. Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 34-35, italics added.

122. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 80, italics added.

alas, becoming increasingly apparent.”¹²³ After World War II, in 1947, Shoghi Effendi writes of “The *steadily deepening crisis* which mankind is traversing, on the morrow of the severest ordeal it has yet suffered, and the attendant tribulations and commotions which a *travailing age* must necessarily experience, as a prelude to the birth of the *new World Order*, destined to rise upon the ruins of a *tottering civilization*. . . .”¹²⁴

Note that although Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi write that “everything is tottering” or that civilization is defective, bankrupt, and tottering, that it is “a time of immense crisis” or “a “steadily deepening crisis,” a “gigantic revolution,” and a “universal catastrophe,” they are also in agreement that humanity, and the whole world, is entering a “threshold of a new era” or a “new World Order.” These two processes, one destructive (the old, death) and one creative (the new, birth) are seen not as excluding or contradictory but as parallel and simultaneous phenomena.

Both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi argue that the current modern phase of history is *transitional*. Berdyaev describes it above that “We are living at a time of immense crisis, on the threshold of a new era” and Shoghi Effendi writes that “this Age of Transition” and its tribulations “are the precursors of that Era of blissful felicity.”¹²⁵ Similarly, both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi utilize the metaphor of darkness/light in connection with the ages. Berdyaev writes for example that “we have passed from an era of light to an era of darkness”¹²⁶ and “Now night is on us. We are going into a period of senility and decay.”¹²⁷ Similarly, Shoghi Effendi writes of “that turbulent Age, into the outer fringes of whose darkest phase we are now beginning to enter.”¹²⁸

It is important to notice that Both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi synoptically view the current phase of history as analogous to that of the fall of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages. For example, Berdyaev writes that “Our age resembles that of the fall of the Roman Empire, the failure and drying-up of Greco-Roman culture. . . .”¹²⁹ and that “our epoch is the end of modern times and the beginning of a new middle age.”¹³⁰ Berdyaev does not see this as a “renaissance but the dark beginnings of a middle age, and that we have got to pass through a new civilized barbarism.”¹³¹

Berdyaev continues to write in 1924 “The beginning of *this new era* was marked by a general barbarization” and that:

123. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 45, italics added.

124. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 29, italics added.

125. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 171.

126. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 70.

127. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

128. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 171.

129. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, pp. 57-58.

130. *Ibid.*, p. 69.

131. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

. . . the whole historical order that had built up the past was overrun by a torrent of disordered forces. And here we may well remind ourselves that the most terrible wars and revolutions, *wrecking of civilizations, fall of empires*, are not due solely to man's will but are also in a measure the work of divine providence. *Our age is like that, which saw the passing of the ancient world.*¹³²

Ten years later (1934) Shoghi Effendi writes in a similar vein and asks the following:

Might we not look upon the momentous happenings which, in the course of the past twenty years, have so deeply agitated every continent of the earth, as ominous signs simultaneously proclaiming *the agonies of a disintegrating civilization* . . . the signs of an impending catastrophe, *strangely reminiscent of the Fall of the Roman Empire in the West*, which threatens to engulf the whole structure of present-day civilization . . . a tumult which will grow in scope and in intensity as the implications of this constantly evolving Scheme are more fully understood and its ramifications more widely extended over the surface of the globe.¹³³

Notice that both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi write of “a torrent of disordered forces” or “signs of an impending catastrophe,” and the wrecking of civilizations” and “the agonies of a disintegrating civilization.” External barbaric tribes do not – like the Roman Empire – bring about the wrecking and disintegration of modern civilization but it is *civilization itself*, which is barbaric. Thus, both authors view not only the age but also the current civilization as highly dysfunctional, obsolete and ultimately dying.

Consequently, both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi see “this constantly evolving Scheme” as part of a greater historical cycle. Berdyaev, for example, writes of “the destinies of peoples, societies, cultures,” and that “they all pass through the clear-cut stages of *birth, infancy, adolescence, maturity, efflorescence, old age, decay and death.*”¹³⁴ Berdyaev hence consider peoples and societies as “living organisms” that exist “within the framework of history,” that they “are doomed to whither, decay and dies as soon as their efflorescence is past,” that “No great culture has been immune from decadence” and that “Every great national society and culture has been subject to this process of decay and death.”¹³⁵

Similarly, Shoghi Effendi writes of:

132. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 74, italics added. See also pp. 144, 155.

133. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 155, italics added.

134. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Meaning of History*, p. 194, italics added.

135. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

The long ages of *infancy* and *childhood*, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of *adolescence*, when the impetuosity of *youth* and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the *maturity* that characterize the stage of *manhood*. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness, which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.¹³⁶

Although both authors include the stages of infancy, adolescence, and maturity, only Berdyaev includes in this scheme birth, efflorescence, old age, decay and death.

What is then, the goal of the next stage or age? Here again, both Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi seem to be in agreement. Berdyaev writes that “We are entering an epoch which at many points makes one think of the age of Hellenic universalism,” and although there been previous “attempts at world-unification,” he continues to write that:

Today the organization of each people affects the state of the whole world; what happens in Russia has repercussions in every country and upon every race. There has never before been such a close contact between the Eastern and Western worlds, which have lived so markedly separate. Civilization is ceasing to be European and becoming “of the world”: Europe will have to renounce her pretension to a monopoly of culture.¹³⁷

Berdyaev continues in the same work to write of “The modern world, rent by the violent quarrels of countries, classes, and individuals, prone to suspicion and hate,” and yet that it “is drawn from every side towards a universal unification, to a conquest over that national exclusivism which has been responsible for the fall of nations.” Thus, he continues to write of “if we examine deeply enough there certainly can be discerned a stirring towards a world-wide unification more vast than a unified Europe.”¹³⁸

Similar ideas of “globalization” can be found in later writings were Berdyaev writes, “Only progress in the direction of lessening sovereignty of national states and toward a world-federation of peoples will save us . . .” and “Along the bursting forth of militant Nationalism we see the universalization of mankind.”¹³⁹

136. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 117, italics added.

137. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time*, p. 98.

138. *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

139. Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, pp. 107, 108.

Similar pioneering ideas of “globalization” can also be seen in the early writings of Shoghi Effendi.¹⁴⁰ In a chapter entitled “The Goal of the New World Order” Shoghi Effendi refers to “political and economic unification of the world” as “a principle that has been increasingly advocated in recent times” but he continues to write that “the unification of mankind in this age” is part of “God's divinely appointed scheme.” Shoghi Effendi continues to write that “It is towards this goal – the goal of a new World Order, Divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, equitable in principle, challenging in its features – that a harassed humanity must strive.”¹⁴¹ In a later letter Shoghi Effendi writes of “the political unification of the Eastern and Western Hemispheres,” but he views this process as a prelude to “the emergence of a world government, and the establishment of the Lesser Peace.”¹⁴²

In a more elaborate way Shoghi Effendi describes the goal of the Bahá'í Faith “is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations” which is “signalizing . . . the coming of age of the entire human race.” Shoghi Effendi continues to state that the unification of mankind is “marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet” and that:

The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture – all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era – should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society.¹⁴³

Although Shoghi Effendi is writing in 1941 that the present state of the world and “indeed even its immediate future, is dark, distressingly dark,” he continues to write, “Its distant future, however, is radiant, gloriously radiant – so radiant that no eye can visualize it.”¹⁴⁴ Thus, it should be clear that despite their severe macrocritique, Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi are both ultimately optimistic about the future collective life of humanity on this planet.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this article was to portray and compare Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi as major macrocritics of the 20th century. I have thus introduced the novel concept of macrocriticism and used three dimensions of their macrocri-

140. For a more detailed discussion on Shoghi Effendi and Globalization, see Zaid Lundberg, “Global Claims, Global Aims: An Analysis of Shoghi Effendi's *The World Order of Bahá'u'l-láh*,” in M. Warburg, ed., *Bahá'í and Globalisation* (Aarhus: Aarhus Press, 2005).

141. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 33.

142. Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith*, p. 25.

143. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 163.

144. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 116.

tique: 1) The World/Society/ Civilization; 2) Ethics/Religion/Secular-isation; and 3) History/The Age/Times. From the passages quoted and examined it is clear that not only do Berdyaev and Shoghi Effendi direct severe critique within all three dimensions, but also their criticisms are also very similar.

In addition, both authors also portray a revival of religion/spirituality beyond the current secular, chaotic and critical phase of history. Berdyaev puts his hopes on a Christian renaissance or the Second Coming of Christ. Shoghi Effendi believes in the Messianic claims of Bahá'u'lláh and the present and future redemptive role of the Bahá'í Faith.

Finally, even though both authors reveal a highly critical picture of an obsolete and dying civilization or era, they simultaneously depict the birth of an emerging *global* civilization or era beyond the cataclysmic crises of dysfunctional nationalist states.

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

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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'i 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 metaphysics 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'i 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 Bahá'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 Baha'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 Baha'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

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77. *Gleanings* 130.1.

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*Bahá'í Teachings and the Principle of Separation between Religion and State**

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Introductory remarks

Separation of religion and state is one of the controversial issues in Bahá'í scholarship. Christian critics often blame the Bahá'í Faith for promoting theocracy and seeking to merge religion with state. Already in 1915, Samuel Wilson, in his study of the Bahá'í religion argues, "Bahá'ism has set forth a system of civil government. Claiming to be a revelation from God, it has enunciated the laws and regulations of the future State."¹ Quoting from early Bahá'ís who believed that Bahá'í Houses of Justice would eventually replace the civil authorities and governments,² Wilson concludes that:

Councils infallible and absolute, superior to appeal or protest; deciding and exacting obedience in every department of the life of humanity – religious, domestic, social, educational, financial, judicial, and political [– will represent a religious-political regime,] a priestcraft such as the world has not yet seen.³

Later, in the 1970s, another Christian polemical writer, William Miller, in his book about the new religious movement, restates the same charge that

* A version of this article was presented at the Bahá'í Colloquy at the Annual Conference of the American Academy of Religion, Washington, November 2006.

1 Samuel Graham Wilson, *Bahá'ism and Its Claims: A Study of the Religion Promulgated by Baha Ullah and Abdul Baha* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1915), p. 141.

2. Wilson quotes Dreyfus and Remey – *ibid.*, p. 143.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

the Bahá'í Faith aims at combining the spheres of church and state into one religio-political realm.⁴

On the other side of the spectrum and in recent years, some dissident Bahá'í scholars have challenged the apparently prevailing theocratic aspirations of their religious community. Such scholars as, for instance, Juan Cole in his book *Modernity and the Millenium*, argues that the founders of the Bahá'í Faith were, in fact, modernists and advocated the separation of religion and state as well as pluralistic multi-party democracy on a global scale. Cole wrote that “Baha'u'llah on numerous occasions made it quite clear that he and his religion accepted the separation of religion and state.”⁵ He points out that:

Classical Shi'ite doctrine . . . has held that all power, civil and religious, should be concentrated in the hands of an infallible imam, and even the compromises of Shi'ite political theory in the nineteenth century had not recognized a true separation of religion and state. Baha'u'llah, claiming to be the promised one of Islam, would have been justified in the terms of this tradition in claiming the prerogative of rule. But he refused to do so, either for himself or for his religion. He repudiated the entire notion of an absolutist state, and of a theocratic one.⁶

Another controversial author, Sen McGlinn, in his book on postmodern Bahá'í theology, makes an even more radical claim that the principle of separation between church and state represents the essential teaching of all Abrahamic traditions, including Islam and the Bahá'í Faith. McGlinn is convinced that “it is evident that the question of church and state is universal, not to be addressed in terms of Shiah or Islamic or Christian or Western essentialisms.”⁷ He writes:

The functional differentiation of society in successful contemporary societies entails not just the separation of institutions, but also the differentiation of the individual's roles as citizen, fellow-believer, scientist and economic agent. Although religion has great potential in mobilizing the masses, any attempt to achieve political modernization by appealing to this power sacrifices the most fundamental principle

4. William McElwer Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teaching* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974).

5. Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millenium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), p. 34.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

7. Sen McGlinn, *Church and State: A Postmodern Political Theology, Book One* (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden Univ, 2005), p. 137.

of modernization: the separation of the religious and political spheres.⁸

My article aims at revisiting the controversial theme of separation between religion and state in its relation to Bahá'í teachings as found in the sacred scriptures of this religion.

Separation of church and state

The principle of separation of religion and state was formulated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the Enlightenment thinkers in Europe. A French protestant scholar, Pierre Bayle, was one of its early proponents back in the seventeenth century. Bayle's advocacy of religious freedom was, in the words of one historian of the Enlightenment, ". . . not intended to serve any particular faith, but [established] a universal, purely philosophical goal and [represented] a principle, which is equally valid and binding for every form of belief."⁹

Another Protestant philosopher, the "patron philosopher of liberalism" John Locke in his *Letters Concerning Toleration* set up this principle on a solid theoretical ground by distinguishing "the business of civil government from that of religion, and [settling] the just bound that lie between the one and the other."¹⁰

Overall, the Enlightenment thinkers developed a new attitude toward religion and its role in society. They made a case for universal tolerance and argued that freedom of conscience should be granted to all members of society whatever religion they profess, if any. As François Voltaire pointed out: "Discord is the great ill of mankind, and tolerance is the only remedy for it."¹¹ The practical instrument for securing tolerance and freedom of conscience was the separation of public and private spheres, or the domains of government and religion. Again, as Voltaire put it, "the authority of the clergy is, and can, be spiritual only . . . [it] should not have any temporal power," while the civil government "must permit no enterprise which puts the members of society in external and civil dependence on an ecclesiastical body."¹² This way, the proper balance between religious and secular institutions is maintained, a balance that prevents these institutions from corrupting each other.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

9. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 167.

10. John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. by Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 82.

11. François Voltaire, "Reflections on Religion," *ibid.*, p. 130.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Practically speaking, the separation between religion and state entails at least three things. First, religious organizations should not participate in civil government and in making laws. Next, the civil authorities, in their turn, should not privilege some religions and prohibit others. Finally, the state institutions should not interfere with the private lives of the citizens, and their religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) must not be one of the criteria for holding public office.

In the American legal tradition these provisions are found in the Article 6 of and the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution of the United States. A scholar of religion in America, Julia Corbett, explains in her book on the subject:

Article 6 prohibits religious requirements for holding public office . . . The First Amendment to the Constitution [in its] “establishment clause” says that the United States Congress cannot make any religion the official religion of the United States. It cannot act in a way that gives preferential treatment or support to one religion above others. Nor can it support religion or non-religion generally, one over the other . . . The second . . . “free exercise” clause . . . states that the government cannot interfere with any person’s religion. [Finally, the] Fourteenth Amendment holds that the states as well are not to “abridge the privileges” of their citizens, including the privilege of religious freedom.¹³

Historically, the establishment of the separation between religion and state in Western countries was paralleled by the rise of so-called “secularism” – modern culture that was neutral, if not indifferent, to religion, its beliefs, practices and values. Religion often found itself on the periphery of private sphere while, in the public sphere its role significantly decreased. One of the most important functions of religion as an institution is to uphold morality and ethical standards of behavior. Since the influence of religion in the public domain diminished drastically, the foundations of morality seem to have rapidly deteriorated in modern societies, especially in the past century. Modern times also witnessed the unprecedented rise of atheism. Overall, the main dilemma of modernity appeared to be as follows – the more freedom humanity gains, the more mistakes it makes. In the end, freedom always entails the right to make wrong choices – otherwise it cancels itself. The question is – how to balance, in the best way, its positive and negative effects and consequences?

13. Julia Mitchell Corbett, *Religion in America*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), pp. 12-14.

Government's non-involvement with religion

The first aspect of the separation of Church and state refers to the equal treatment by government of all religions and its non-interference with religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) of the people. Bahá'í sacred texts explicitly, and on various occasions, support and promote those principles. In fact, they constitute some of the most important tenets of this spiritual tradition.

The Bahá'í Faith is the only religion that recognizes and accepts all major religious traditions of the world as valid and true. The animating spirit of this religion is the establishment of global unity of humankind, and such a unity is impossible without a fair and peaceful dialogue and cooperation among diverse spiritual paths. Hence, in "Glad-Tidings," for instance, the founder of the Faith Bahá'u'lláh says that "in this Most Great Revelation . . . the law of holy war hath been blotted out from the Book" and he appeals to his followers that they "[c]onsort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."¹⁴ In *The Most Holy Book*, the mother-scripture of the Bahá'í revelation, Bahá'u'lláh permits Bahá'ís to marry people of other religions as well as unbelievers.¹⁵ In his many writings, he summons people to use religion as an instrument of unity and harmony rather than strife and discord. In "Ornaments," for instance, he writes:

The second Taráz is to consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship, [to] associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance . . . Blessed are such as hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy and are free from animosity and hatred.¹⁶

The key social instruments for establishing such a state of affairs on a global scale are explicitly spelled out in Bahá'í scriptures as well. They include the equality of all under one law and the non-interference of government in the domain of human thought. In *Paris Talks*, for example, 'Abd'ul-Bahá, who succeeded his father Bahá'u'lláh as the leader of the new religious movement, said that "[a]ll prejudices, whether of religion, race, politics or nation must be renounced . . . All men are equal before the law, which must reign absolutely . . . there must be no favour shown

14. "Bishárát (Glad-Tidings)," *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. A Compilation* (New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1998), 1st ed. 1986, p. 208.

15. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-I-Aqdas. The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), ¶ 139, Q84.

16. "Tarázát (Ornaments)," *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 216.

to individuals.”¹⁷ More specifically on religion, he emphasized that if it “becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act . . . Any religion which is not a cause of love and unity is no religion.”¹⁸ In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, ‘Abd’ul-Bahá also refers to the freedom of religious expression: “When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail – that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs – development and growth are inevitable.”¹⁹

Religion’s non-involvement with government

The second element of the separation between religion and state refers to religion and its non-involvement with the government and its institutions. Modern political theory affirms that separation must be mutual, since the necessary prerequisite for the state’s non-interference with religion is religion’s non-involvement in politics itself; otherwise, it would suppress or persecute other sects. While formulating this program, modern thinkers may have had in mind the persecution of pagans by the Christians in the late Roman Empire or of their fellow Christians during the Middle Ages.

When it comes to this second aspect of separation of church and state, the teachings found in Bahá’í scriptures seem less clear and even ambiguous. On the one hand, in his epistles to the rulers of the world, for example, Bahá’u’lláh stresses that he has no intention of claiming power over their kingdoms. He contrasts the spiritual authority of the prophets to the worldly dominion of the rulers. This important theme runs throughout many of Bahá’u’lláh’s later writings as well. In the “Book of the Covenant,” he writes, for instance, “Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God . . . He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain.”²⁰ However, in another tablet, Bahá’u’lláh also says with respect to government that all “affairs are committed to the care of just kings and presidents and of the Trustees of the House of Justice.”²¹ He still maintains the separation between administration and worship within his own religion: “All matters of State should be referred to the

17. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, in *Writings and Utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (New Delhi, India: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2000), pp. 773, 777.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 764.

19. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, *ibid.*, p. 976.

20. “Kitáb-I-‘Ahd (Book of the Covenant),” *Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 325.

21. “Lawh-I-Dunyá (Tablet of the World),” *ibid.*, p. 250.

House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book."²²

Similar statements are found in the utterances and writings of Bahá'u'lláh's successor 'Abd'ul-Bahá. In his early work *A Traveler's Narrative*, he writes, for instance, that the Bahá'í religion has "no worldly object nor any concern with political matters [and] is restricted to spiritual things and confined to matters of conscience; it has nothing to do with affairs of government nor any concern with the powers of the throne."²³ He repeats in another place that, following "the command of the Blessed Perfection [Bahá'ís] refrained absolutely from interference in political matters [and] were not associated with any party."²⁴ In his *Will and Testament*, however, while delineating the future responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice, the main governing body of the Bahá'í administration, 'Abd'ul-Bahá also states that "This House of Justice enacteth the laws and government enforceth them."²⁵

How can one reconcile those seemingly contradictory statements? Taking the non-interference stance, one may come to a position close to that of Juan Cole who makes the Bahá'í Faith the religion of the Enlightenment. Then the question arises, for example, as to why modern believers would give preference to the Bahá'í over the Christian religion if in his social-political views Bahá'u'lláh could not offer anything more advanced than Thomas Jefferson? On the other hand, if inclined toward a theocratic model, one may share Samuel Wilson's concerns that Bahá'ís are covert politicians. Explicitly they swear to abstain from politics, but in reality they are just not willing to participate in liberal democratic government. Instead, they plan to transform the realm of politics peacefully through conversion so as to take over all power on a global scale. Both alternatives appear inadequate and not quite correspond to the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings. Since both democratic and theocratic tendencies are, indeed, present in the scriptural texts, one may suggest a more complex approach that harmonizes and forms a proper balance between both trends.

Religious vs. secular democracy

Generally speaking, there exist two opposite solutions to the organization of power. The first one is known as absolutism and in its extreme form, it combines spiritual and temporal authority in the hands of one person, usually a monarch. This political model was most common

22. "Ishráqát (Splendors)," *ibid.*, p. 272.

23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *A Traveler's Narrative*, in *Writings and Utterances*, p. 115.

24. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abd'ul-Bahá*, *ibid.*, p. 454.

25. *Will and Testament of 'Abd'ul-Bahá*, *ibid.*, p. 684.

throughout human history. Ancient Egyptian pharaohs and Roman Emperors were the supreme rulers of their countries as well as the high priests of their respective religions. In the Middle Ages the ideal of absolutism remained unchallenged and even reinforced by the ultimate authority of the Pope who sought domination over the crown. Medieval attempt at theocracy was a unique example of absolutism *par excellence*, and it showed in the most clear and evident way all the dangers of such form of government with its characteristically high concentration of power in the hands of one person. The second and opposite social-political system was formulated and established in Modern times in the form of liberal multi-party democracy. It rejected absolutism, promoted human rights and freedoms, and was based on the division of the three branches of government and the separation of religion and state.

Bahá'í scriptures also unequivocally condemn absolutism as well as the tyranny that often accompanies it. In the epistle to the Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh commends the queen for having introduced the consultative assembly or the parliament into the British government. In his own religion, Bahá'u'lláh also advises in favor of the electability of the rulers and collective decision-making practices. It is of no surprise, therefore, that both he and 'Abd'ul-Bahá on various occasions speak favorably of democracy and Western civilization.

Everything is good in its proper degree, however, and Bahá'u'lláh warns his followers that too much freedom may harm people. "If carried to excess," he writes, "civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation."²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh sums up his approach in a condensed form in *The Most Holy Book*:

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench . . . Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness . . . We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others.²⁷

As a result, in the domain of government Bahá'u'lláh favors moderate solutions that blend the democratic representation of the people with the

26. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 640.

27. *The Most Holy Book*, ¶ 123-124.

divine right and authority of the king. In “Glad Tidings” he points out, for instance:

Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof.²⁸

It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that Bahá'u'lláh's vision for the possible world government would also entail a blending of religious and secular authorities with checks and balances on both sides – a form that apparently has never been tried before in human history. Such a social-political system may be called “constitutional theocracy.” However, the term “theocracy” in this case is rather misleading because it usually presupposes unelected religious officials holding the absolute power in their own hands, like it was, for example, with medieval papacy. Hence, one might suggest in its stead a different term – “constitutional religious democracy” – which, in my judgment, describes with more precision and accuracy a unique and complex nature of this global vision.

It should be pointed out that whatever form, if any, the distribution of power between the Universal House of Justice and civil government may have been envisioned by the founders of the Bahá'í Faith to take place in the future, there always remains some degree of separation between the Bahá'í religion and state because of the distinction between canonical and civil law and their different spheres of application. Bahá'í ritual of marriage, for instance, refers only to Bahá'ís, as do the inheritance laws, burial practices, etc. The fines that are prescribed in *The Most Holy Book* for specific offences, such as adultery, for instance, will apply only to Bahá'ís as well since the Bahá'í Faith is an independent, self-sponsored religion and does not accept monetary contributions from non-members.

In addition, if Bahá'ís are successful in promulgating their teachings to the point of creating a truly global religion, the measure of responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice may also depend on the distribution of powers between the national governments and the global super-state. When addressing the issue of balancing local and central authorities, Bahá'í scriptures seem to favor decentralization. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, for instance, that:

. . . in the future there shall be no centralization in the countries of the world . . . each province will be independent in itself, but there will

28. “Bishárát (Glad-Tidings),” *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 212.

be federal union protecting the interests of the various independent states . . . To cast aside centralization which promotes despotism is the exigency of the time.²⁹

Conclusion

Let me return, in conclusion, to my initial question of whether the Bahá'í religion does or does not support the principle of separation between church and state. As we have demonstrated in the previous analysis, neither a simple affirmation nor negation does justice to the complexity of the issue. Bahá'í scriptures definitely affirm some of the elements of separation while modifying its other aspects. Thus, in the Enlightenment thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, for example, are declared as general philosophical principles that are put into practice through a mutual non-interference between religion and civil government. In the Bahá'í scriptures, the same principles are supported and promoted as part of religious ideology and Bahá'í institutions are seen as the guarantors of putting them into practice worldwide.

In other words, Bahá'í scriptural texts reaffirm in a different, religious context those elements of the Enlightenment ideology that constitute the very basis of a healthy society. This refers, first of all, to the elimination of tyranny and promotion of human rights such as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, etc. At the same time, the Bahá'í writings are counteracting those aspects of the Enlightenment philosophy that seem to threaten the continuous progress of civilization. This, in its turn, relates primarily to irreligion or secularism and moral degradation as its consequence, as well as to all forms of divisiveness and conflicts within society, including religious, racial, national, political and economic divisions and inequality.

As for the distribution of power between the Universal House of Justice and secular government, it is not specified in the writings of the founders of the Bahá'í religion and, therefore, it is open to change and transformation throughout history. Let us not forget that the authority of Roman bishops – the future Catholic Popes – has dramatically increased since the fifth century when the Roman Empire fell to the barbarians and its civil government was no longer able to help and protect its citizens. The structure of the global super-state, if such a governmental structure arises, will also depend on the condition and capabilities of civil authorities on a planetary scale. As a general principle, the more the divisiveness of the people in the world increases, the more centralized form of government they will need. And, on the contrary, the stronger the moral val-

29. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, in *Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 948-49.

ues and the more united people are, the more decentralized such a global government will become. No matter what the circumstances may hold in the future, the main responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice are explicitly set in *The Most Holy Book*. They concern education, promotion of faith and charitable causes – “Verily have We made it a shelter for the poor and needy.”³⁰

University of the Arts

30. *The Most Holy Book*, ¶ 48.

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