

**Aspects of the harmony of
science and religion as
described in
'Abdu'l-Bahá's talks**

Acuto, July 2010 – Iscander Micael Tinto

Prelude

This presentation analyzes definitions of science and religion and the relations between science and religion as expounded in the discourses ‘Abdu’l-Bahá pronounced during His visits to Europe and America. It also studies the concepts of intellect, mind and reason as expounded in these talks.

Prelude

In one of His talks ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states “If we say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test”. In other talks He seems to indicate the pre-eminent role of intellect or mind in the pursuit of the goals of both religion and science.

Prelude

I will also try to analyze how the concept of harmony of science and religion is challenged in today's society and suggests possible responses to these challenges in the light of the Bahá'í Writings.

Introduction

If we say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation p. 107)

Introduction

“...religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop. Far from being in conflict with one another, these fundamental modes of the mind's exploration of reality are mutually dependent and have been most productive in those rare but happy periods of history when their complementary nature has been recognized and they have been able to work together.

Introduction

The insights and skills generated by scientific advance will have always to look to the guidance of spiritual and moral commitment to ensure their appropriate application; religious convictions, no matter how cherished they may be, must submit, willingly and gratefully, to impartial testing by scientific methods.”

(The Universal House of Justice, 2002 April, To the World's Religious Leaders, p. 6)

Introduction

...Bahá'u'lláh has not brought into existence a new religion to stand beside the present multiplicity of sectarian organizations. Rather has He recast the whole conception of religion as the principal force impelling the development of consciousness.

(One Common Faith, p. 23)

Introduction

...refusing to be labeled as a mere philosophy of life, or as an eclectic code of ethical conduct, or even as a new religion, the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh is now visibly succeeding in demonstrating its claim and title to be regarded as a World Religion, destined to attain, in the fullness of time, the status of a world-embracing Commonwealth... (Shoghi Effendi, World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 196)

Science and religion

Materialism asserts that a complete description of nature consists of an understanding of the structures of which it is comprised together with the patterns which those structures follow, while theism insists on the need for a conscious God who somehow rises above those patterns.

Science and religion

At the end of the eighteenth and to the middle of the nineteenth century, almost every enlightened thinker expected religion to disappear in the twentieth century. The belief was based on the power of Reason. Religion was associated with superstition, unprovable beliefs, a form of fear which was used as protection against other fears a form of security one might associate with the behaviour of children and which they believed, in fact, had arisen in the 'childhood' of the human race.

Science and religion

Religion, in this view, arose out of the fears of nature, both the physical terrors of the environment and the dangers lurking in the inner psyche which were released at night or conjured up by special diviners. The more rational answer we owe the start, of course, to the Greeks was philosophy, whose task was to uncover physis or the hidden order of nature.

Science and religion

Reason is the uncovering the underlying structure of the natural order. Rationalization is the substitution of a technical order for a natural order in the rhythms of work, in the functional adaptation of means to ends, in the criteria for use of objects, the principal criterion being efficiency and the imposition of bureaucratic structures of organization to replace the ties of kinship and primordial relations. It is the world of technical rules and bureaucratic roles. And since, as most sociologists believe, men are largely, shaped by the institutions in which they live, the world has become, in Max Weber's terrifying phrase, 'an iron cage'.

Science and religion

As summed up by Weber: “With the progress of science and technology, man has stopped believing in magic powers, in spirits and demons; he has lost his sense of prophecy and, above all, his sense of the sacred. Reality has become dreary, flat and utilitarian, leaving a great void in the souls of men which they seek to fill by furious activity and through various devices and substitutes.

Secularization Science and religion

The word secularization was originally employed, in the wake of the Wars of Religion, to denote the removal of territory or property from the control of ecclesiastical authorities. In this sense, secularization means the disengagement of religion from political life the classic instance is the separation of Church and State; and the sundering of religion from aesthetics so that art need no longer bend to moral norms, but can follow its own impulses, wherever they lead. In short, it is the shrinkage of institutional authority over the spheres of public life, the retreat to a private world where religions have authority only over their followers, and not over any other section of the polity or society.

Intellect, mind and reason

...out of all the realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and has honoured it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world. Through the agency of this great endowment, He has in every epoch cast on the mirror of creation new and wonderful configurations. If we look objectively upon the world of being, it will become apparent that from age to age, the temple of existence has continually been embellished with a fresh grace, and distinguished with an ever-varying splendour, deriving from wisdom and the power of thought.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 1)

Intellect, mind and reason

To man is given the special gift of the intellect by which he is able to receive a larger share of the light Divine. The Perfect Man is as a polished mirror reflecting the Sun of Truth, manifesting the attributes of God. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 25)

Intellect, mind and reason

The light of the intellect enables us to understand and realize all that exists, but it is only the Divine Light that can give us sight for the invisible things, and which enables us to see truths that will only be visible to the world thousands of years hence. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 69)

Intellect, mind and reason

...the reality of the intellect,...discovereth the inner essence of all things, and comprehendeth those realities which cannot be seen... (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 46)

Intellect, mind and reason

Through intellectual and intelligent inquiry science is the discoverer of all things. It unites present and past, reveals the history of bygone nations and events, and confers upon man today the essence of all human knowledge and attainment throughout the ages. By intellectual processes and logical deductions of reason this superpower in man can penetrate the mysteries of the future and anticipate its happenings. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 49)

Intellect, mind and reason

The sciences and arts, all inventions, crafts, trades and their products have come forth from the intellect of man. It is evident that within the human organism the intellect occupies the supreme station. Therefore, if religious belief, principle or creed is not in accord with the intellect and the power of reason, it is surely superstition. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 63)

Intellect, mind and reason

By mere intellectual development and power of reason, man cannot attain to his fullest degree -- that is to say, by means of intellect alone he cannot accomplish the progress effected by religion. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 170)

Intellect, mind and reason

He has created in his being the mysteries of the divine Kingdom. He has bestowed upon him the power of intellect so that through the attribute of reason, when fortified by the Holy Spirit, he may penetrate and discover ideal realities and become informed of the mysteries of the world of significances.

Intellect, mind and reason

As this power to penetrate the ideal knowledges is superhuman, supernatural, man becomes the collective center of spiritual as well as material forces so that the divine spirit may manifest itself in his being, the effulgences of the Kingdom shine within the sanctuary of his heart, the signs of the attributes and perfections of God reveal themselves in a newness of life, the everlasting glory and eternal existence be attained, the knowledge of God illumine, and the mysteries of the realm of might be unsealed. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 302)

Intellect, mind and reason

The intelligence of man, his reasoning powers, his knowledge, his scientific achievements, all these being manifestations of the spirit, partake of the inevitable law of spiritual progress and are, therefore, of necessity, immortal. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 90)

Intellect, mind and reason

A good character is in the sight of God and His chosen ones and the possessors of insight, the most excellent and praiseworthy of all things, but always on condition that its center of emanation should be reason and knowledge and its base should be true moderation. Were the implications of this subject to be developed as they deserve the work would grow too long and our main theme would be lost to view. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 59)

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He has bestowed upon him the power of intellect so that through the attribute of reason, when fortified by the Holy Spirit, he may penetrate and discover ideal realities and become informed of the mysteries of the world of significances. As this power to penetrate the ideal knowledges is superhuman, supernatural, man becomes the collective center of spiritual as well as material forces so that the divine spirit may manifest itself in his being,

Intellect, mind and reason

the effulgences of the Kingdom shine within the sanctuary of his heart, the signs of the attributes and perfections of God reveal themselves in a newness of life, the everlasting glory and eternal existence be attained, the knowledge of God illumine, and the mysteries of the realm of might be unsealed. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 303)

Intellect, mind and reason

I hope that you will all become eloquent. The greatest gifts of man are reason and eloquence of expression. The perfect man is both intelligent and eloquent. He has knowledge and knows how to express it. Unless man express himself in this day he will remain like a closed casket and one cannot know whether it contain jewels or glass. I desire that all of you may speak on the material and divine sciences with clear and convincing words. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Divine Philosophy, p. 103)

Intellect, mind and reason

God has conferred upon and added to man a distinctive power -- the faculty of intellectual investigation into the secrets of creation, the acquisition of higher knowledge -- the greatest virtue of which is scientific enlightenment.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 30)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on science

That which is found to be real and conformable to reason must be accepted, and whatever science and reason cannot support must be rejected as imitation and not reality. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 176)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on science

Scientific knowledge is the highest attainment upon the human plane, for science is the discoverer of realities. It is of two kinds: material and spiritual. Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 138)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on science

Scientific knowledge is the highest attainment upon the human plane, for science is the discoverer of realities. It is of two kinds: material and spiritual. Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both. A bird has two wings; it cannot fly with one. Material and spiritual science are the two wings of human uplift and attainment.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on science

Both are necessary -- one the natural, the other supernatural; one material, the other divine. By the divine we mean the discovery of the mysteries of God, the comprehension of spiritual realities, the wisdom of God, inner significances of the heavenly religions and foundation of the law. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 138)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on science

Natural philosophy seeks knowledge of physical verities and explains material phenomena, whereas divine philosophy deals with ideal verities and phenomena of the spirit. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 326)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on science

With the love of God all sciences are accepted and beloved, but without it, are fruitless; nay, rather the cause of insanity. Every science is like unto a tree; if the fruit of it is the love of God, that is a blessed tree. Otherwise it is dried wood and finally a food for fire. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá v3, p. 687)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on religion

The first teaching is that man should investigate reality, for reality is contrary to dogmatic interpretations and imitations of ancestral forms of belief to which all nations and peoples adhere so tenaciously. These blind imitations are contrary to the fundamental basis of the divine religions, for the divine religions in their central and essential teaching are based upon unity, love and peace, whereas these variations and imitations have ever been productive of warfare, sedition and strife.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 81)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá on religion

Religion, then, is the necessary connection which emanates from the reality of things; and as the supreme Manifestations of God are aware of the mysteries of beings, therefore, They understand this essential connection, and by this knowledge establish the Law of God. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 158)

Knowledge

The knowledge of things which men universally have is gained by reflection or by evidence -- that is to say, either by the power of the mind the conception of an object is formed, or from beholding an object the form is produced in the mirror of the heart. The circle of this knowledge is very limited because it depends upon effort and attainment. But the second sort of knowledge, which is the knowledge of being, is intuitive; it is like the cognizance and consciousness that man has of himself.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 157)

Knowledge

Know that there are two kinds of knowledge: the knowledge of the essence of a thing and the knowledge of its qualities. The essence of a thing is known through its qualities; otherwise, it is unknown and hidden. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 219)

Knowledge

Every kind of knowledge, every science, is as a tree: if the fruit of it be the love of God, then is it a blessed tree, but if not, that tree is but dried-up wood, and shall only feed the fire.
(Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 181)

Reconciling science and religion

Another cause of dissension and disagreement is the fact that religion has been pronounced at variance with science. Between scientists and the followers of religion there has always been controversy and strife for the reason that the latter have proclaimed religion superior in authority to science and considered scientific announcement opposed to the teachings of religion. Bahá'u'lláh declared that religion is in complete harmony with science and reason. If religious belief and doctrine is at variance with reason, it proceeds from the limited mind of man and not from God;

Reconciling science and religion

Among other principles of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings was the harmony of science and religion. Religion must stand the analysis of reason. It must agree with scientific fact and proof so that science will sanction religion and religion fortify science. Both are indissolubly welded and joined in reality. If statements and teachings of religion are found to be unreasonable and contrary to science, they are outcomes of superstition and imagination. Innumerable doctrines and beliefs of this character have arisen in the past ages... Consider the superstitions and mythology of the Romans, Greeks and Egyptians; all were contrary to religion and science. It is now evident that the beliefs of these nations were superstitions, but in those times they held to them most tenaciously.

Reconciling science and religion

For example, one of the many Egyptian idols was to those people an authenticated miracle, whereas in reality it was a piece of stone. As science could not sanction the miraculous origin and nature of a piece of rock, the belief in it must have been superstition. It is now evident that it was superstition. Therefore, we must cast aside such beliefs and investigate reality. That which is found to be real and conformable to reason must be accepted, and whatever science and reason cannot support must be rejected as imitation and not reality. Then differences of belief will disappear. All will become as one family, one people, and the same susceptibility to the divine bounty and education will be witnessed among mankind. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 175)

Reconciling science and religion

therefore, it is unworthy of belief and not deserving of attention; the heart finds no rest in it, and real faith is impossible. How can man believe that which he knows to be opposed to reason? Is this possible? Can the heart accept that which reason denies? Reason is the first faculty of man, and the religion of God is in harmony with it. Bahá'u'lláh has removed this form of dissension and discord from among mankind and reconciled science with religion by revealing the pure teachings of the divine reality. This accomplishment is specialized to Him in this Day. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 231)

Reconciling science and religion

Religion must conform to science and reason; otherwise, it is superstition. God has created man in order that he may perceive the verity of existence and endowed him with mind or reason to discover truth. Therefore, scientific knowledge and religious belief must be conformable to the analysis of this divine faculty in man. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 287)

Reconciling science and religion

Bahá'u'lláh has declared that religion must be in accord with science and reason. If it does not correspond with scientific principles and the processes of reason, it is superstition. For God has endowed us with faculties by which we may comprehend the realities of things, contemplate reality itself. If religion is opposed to reason and science, faith is impossible; and when faith and confidence in the divine religion are not manifest in the heart, there can be no spiritual attainment. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 298)

Reconciling science and religion

...religion must reconcile and be in harmony with science and reason. If the religious beliefs of mankind are contrary to science and opposed to reason, they are none other than superstitions and without divine authority, for the Lord God has endowed man with the faculty of reason in order that through its exercise he may arrive at the verities of existence. Reason is the discoverer of the realities of things, and that which conflicts with its conclusions is the product of human fancy and imagination. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 315)

Reconciling science and religion

Furthermore, religion must conform to reason and be in accord with the conclusions of science. For religion, reason and science are realities; therefore, these three, being realities, must conform and be reconciled. A question or principle which is religious in its nature must be sanctioned by science. Science must declare it to be valid, and reason must confirm it in order that it may inspire confidence. If religious teaching, however, be at variance with science and reason, it is unquestionably superstition.

Reconciling science and religion

The Lord of mankind has bestowed upon us the faculty of reason whereby we may discern the realities of things. How then can man rightfully accept any proposition which is not in conformity with the processes of reason and the principles of science? Assuredly such a course cannot inspire man with confidence and real belief. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 394)

Reconciling science and religion

People have a superstitious respect for certain doctrines which are against science and the wise men of the country have thought that religion is opposed to science. Know thou that the great ethical foundation of knowledge is divine revelation and the basis of religion is reality itself. It is like unto the sun which shines on all things making them clear and luminous, whereas lesser lights as well as superstitious beliefs illumine but one aspect of things leaving room for shade and doubt. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Divine Philosophy, p. 186)

Reconciling science and religion

Religion must conform to science and reason; otherwise, it is superstition. God has created man in order that he may perceive the verity of existence and endowed him with mind or reason to discover truth. Therefore, scientific knowledge and religious belief must be conformable to the analysis of this divine faculty in man. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 287)

Reconciling science and religion

Whatever the intelligence of man cannot understand, religion ought not to accept.
(Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 130)

Reconciling science and religion

Religion must agree with science, so that science shall sustain religion and religion explain science. The two must be brought together, indissolubly, in reality. Down to the present day it has been customary for man to accept blindly what was called religion, even though it were not in accord with human reason. (Abdu'l-Baha, Divine Philosophy, p. 26)

Reconciling science and religion

By heavenly sciences I mean divine philosophy and spiritual teachings; by the songs and fragrances of the rose garden I mean the mysteries of the kingdom of kingdoms, the secrets of the degrees of existence and the knowledge of the results of human life.

(Abdu'l-Bahá, Divine Philosophy, p. 139)

Investigation of reality

The first teaching is that man should investigate reality, for reality is contrary to dogmatic interpretations and imitations of ancestral forms of belief to which all nations and peoples adhere so tenaciously. These blind imitations are contrary to the fundamental basis of the divine religions, for the divine religions in their central and essential teaching are based upon unity, love and peace, whereas these variations and imitations have ever been productive of warfare, sedition and strife.

Investigation of reality

Therefore, all souls should consider it incumbent upon them to investigate reality. Reality is one; and when found, it will unify all mankind. Reality is the love of God. Reality is the knowledge of God. Reality is justice. Reality is the oneness or solidarity of mankind. Reality is international peace. Reality is the knowledge of verities. Reality unifies humanity. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 372)

Setting a standard

Furthermore, know ye that God has created in man the power of reason, whereby man is enabled to investigate reality. God has not intended man to imitate blindly his fathers and ancestors. He has endowed him with mind, or the faculty of reasoning, by the exercise of which he is to investigate and discover the truth, and that which he finds real and true he must accept. He must not be an imitator or blind follower of any soul.

Setting a standard

He must not rely implicitly upon the opinion of any man without investigation; nay, each soul must seek intelligently and independently, arriving at a real conclusion and bound only by that reality. The greatest cause of bereavement and disheartening in the world of humanity is ignorance based upon blind imitation. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 291)