

THE ARC OF ASCENT: THE PURPOSE OF PHYSICAL REALITY II

Author: John S. Hatcher

Published by: George Ronald, Oxford, 1994, 385 pages

Reviewed by: Ross Woodman

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) distinguished between the Book of God (scripture) and the Book of Nature. As one of the founders of modern science, his purpose was not to deny the Book of God (understood as a divinely inspired unveiling of a supernatural order) but to release Nature from it so that the natural was no longer answerable to the supernatural, the sensible to the supersensible. Rejecting Aristotle's deduction of the natural order from the final cause or First Mover, Bacon substituted an inductive approach to Nature based upon the disciplined, direct observation of the senses and upon conclusions arising directly and rationally from those observations. His vision in his *New Atlantis* was a vision of an ideal society grounded in the Book of Nature, as that book was read and interpreted by a scientific assembling of our sensible observations of the actual physical world. The result was the separation of religion and science that destroyed the so-called medieval synthesis, a synthesis, which, as in the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas, read Nature with the help of Aristotle in terms of a larger Christian theodicy. With the resulting advancement of the sciences, religion was increasingly relegated to the realm of superstition, the medieval period becoming further marginalized as the "Dark Ages." God as traditionally anthropomorphically imaged became a purely mythological figure that had no place in the secular order shaped by what was called the new philosophy. Now identified with the largely unconscious operations of the pre-scientific mind, his place in the new order—the new Atlantis—was limited to the fictional world of the imagination, which gratified in the form of pleasure certain primitive, instinctual needs that could not be readily gratified in any other way.

John Hatcher's *The Arc of Ascent*, the second volume of his *The Purpose of Physical Reality* is a return to theodicy, which he describes as "discovering God's justice in an ostensibly unjust world" (xi). Under the direct and abiding influence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as the infallible interpreters of what may be described as the apocalyptic theodicy in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, Hatcher, rather than separating the spiritual and physical worlds, renders the physical the handmaiden of the spiritual. "The spiritual world is like unto the phenomenal world," writes 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "They are the exact counterpart of each other. Whatever objects appear in this world of existence are the outer pictures of the world of heaven."¹ The only real access we have to "the world of heaven" is what is revealed by the Manifestation. That this "phenomenal world" is the "exact counterpart of the world of heaven"—indeed, that they are the counterparts of each other—means that they are not two worlds, but one. The Book of God and the Book of Nature are the same Book written by the one divine Author. Thus, the Book of Nature is a part of the larger Book of God much like a sub-plot in relation to the main plot of a novel. Only when we embrace this larger Book and the theodicy that it contains can we properly read and understand the Book of Nature. To separate them, as Francis Bacon did, is to rob Nature of what is for humanity its spiritual purpose. Humans, writes Hatcher, are "essentially spiritual beings taking their beginning in a physical environment . . . as the initial stage in the endless journey of the human soul" (xi).

The purpose of the physical reality in which we begin rather than end (though the end and the beginning may finally be joined when we recognize that the physical is but spirit nascent) is to

¹ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Discourses by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, comp. Howard MacNutt, 2d ed. (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 10.

initiate us into those autonomous transformations that prepare the soul for what Hatcher calls “birth into a spiritual existence” (xi). These autonomous transformations—evolution within Nature (including human nature)—are described by Shoghi Effendi as at once “mystic,” “all-pervasive,” and “indefinable.”² Applying them simultaneously to the life of an individual, a vegetable, and society itself as the expressions of a single vast organic process that constitutes one life, Shoghi Effendi writes:

That mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of the individual and the development of the fruit must, if we would correctly apprehend the utterances of Bahá’u’lláh, have its counterpart in the evolution of the organization of human society.²

Shoghi Effendi is here describing what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls “the arc of ascent,” an “ascent” that finds its fullest articulation in the dynamic principle of progressive revelation unveiled in all its world-encompassing, world-unifying splendor by Bahá’u’lláh. The “arc,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, like “the point of the compass in describing a circle makes no retrograde motion, for this would be contrary to the natural movement and the divine order.”³ The path of ascent from matter to spirit is without return. Spirit unveiled in matter—at once a “mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change”—changes matter forever so that matter as spirit can never be mere matter again (as, indeed, contemporary physics has now shown). Once the divinely initiated process within creation begins, it must continue to progress in accordance with what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls the “Eternal Bounty.” The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh was present in the beginning as the end nascent within it, even as the fruit is nascent in the seed. “The Most Great Peace . . . as conceived by Bahá’u’lláh,” writes Shoghi Effendi, “must *inevitably* follow as the *practical consequence* of the spiritualization of the world and the fusion of all its races, creeds, classes and nations.”⁴ By virtue of the “Eternal Bounty,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes again, “the worth and true ability of man becomes apparent and visible by traversing the degrees of existence and *not by returning*.”⁵ We cannot, as Christ explained to Nicodemus, re-enter our mother’s womb, in order to be born again. Our first birth, like Nature itself, is a metaphor of spirit, of second birth. Nor again, as Christ further explained (Luke 5:37–39), can we put new wine (a new revelation) in an old bottle (an abrogated dispensation).

The Arc of Ascent explores in essence the consequences of no return. Life in all its infinite variety is governed by the “Eternal Bounty” that is the creation itself. The divine process, which for Hatcher finds a human analogue in the creative process of the artist, once set in motion (“through Whom the letters B and E (Be) have been joined and knit together”⁶) is, at the bidding of an omnipotent and loving Will, irreversible. Even if we choose not to participate in the divine process, even if, in the growing milieu of cynicism and despair, we choose to opt out of the creation, rejecting the “Eternal Bounty” as a wishful delusion, we remain nevertheless a part of it. Cynicism and despair will be ultimately forced to confront themselves in the actions they produce. The denial of meaning must ultimately confront its denial. “When the shell is once opened,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explained, “it will be apparent and evident whether it contains a pearl or worthless

² *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, rev. ed. (Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974) 163.

³ *Some Answered Questions*, comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney, 4th ed. (Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974) 268.

⁴ *World Order* 162; emphasis added.

⁵ *Some Answered Questions* 286; emphasis added.

⁶ Bahá’u’lláh, *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá’u’lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed. (Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1969) 321.

matter. When once the plant has grown it will bring forth either thorns or flowers; there is no need for it to grow up again.”⁷

In *The Arc of Ascent*, Hatcher, as a Bahá’í deeply immersed in the Writings, follows the arc of ascent in the very structure of his book. Beginning with an elaboration of the short obligatory prayer, he explains what it means to know God in the physical reality God created as a metaphor for the unknown Essence. He ends his book with a discussion of the transition from the Lesser Peace to the Most Great Peace as if the seed of it were in the short obligatory prayer (as indeed it is). The account of the movement from the personal to the collective—the divine and perfect paradigm or model of a new world order, which Hatcher compares to the wineskin as the container for the new wine—is a monumental undertaking encompassing two volumes in which the newly maturing soul described by Shoghi Effendi is mirrored in the divinely conceived administrative order as opposed to the anarchy that surrounds it. Those who find in that anarchy a mirror of their own inner state serve only to hasten the calamity that is, in reality, the providence of God.

Essential to an understanding of Hatcher’s penetrating reading of the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh is his own literary training as a teacher, a scholar and, perhaps above all, a poet. Informing his reading is his understanding of the metaphorical nature of language (an understanding that one could wish he had more fully explained) in which the flesh that the Word becomes is not, as in the Roman version of the Christian faith, the very substance of Goel, but is, rather, a metaphor for God. Language as metaphor releases it from the literalism that would finally reduce spirit to the matter in which it is initially contained, as if matter itself were not, as spirit, subject to autonomous transformations. Metaphor as the verbal organ of transformation releases language from its imprisonment in a single meaning into a multiplicity of meanings that Bahá’u’lláh metaphorically identifies with “the mystic bride of inner meaning enshrined within the chambers of utterance in the utmost grace and fullest adornment”⁸ The “Brides of inner meaning” who inhabit metaphorical language are waiting, Bahá’u’lláh declares, to come forth unveiled to greet the discerning reader who is eager to release the Word from the ecclesiastical sepulchre that would contain it as it contains the corpse of Christ. Metaphor empties the tomb, restores the dead to life so that they, as at the resurrection, speed forth from their sepulchres. “Metaphor” means to carry over or across from one state to another, the one becoming the other. Metaphor restores product to its process, to the process of making rather than to the thing made. Whether, therefore, Hatcher views physical reality as “a grand metaphor” of the spiritual process that is a human life, or the arrangement of the buildings on Mount Carmel and the use of materials as “a grand metaphor of the emerging status of the administrative order” (298), or, again, the administrative order itself as “a grand metaphor” of the Will of God for this day, he invites us to enter a reality that is forever in the process of its making, the thing as made being itself a divine paradigm or model made by Bahá’u’lláh that awaits a human response. “If there were no man,” declares ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “the perfections of the spirit would not appear, and the light of the mind would not be resplendent in this world.”⁹ This world would be like a tree that bears no fruit; without the fruit the tree is useless.

Hatcher’s mind has been lit by the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. In *The Arc of Ascent* he fully acknowledges his divine source not as an act of “pious worship,” but by bringing his mind to a fullness of action, which Coleridge described as “the whole soul in activity.”¹⁰ “One hour’s

⁷ *Some Answered Questions* 286.

⁸ *Kitab-i-Íqán* [The Book of Certitude], trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2d ed. (Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974) 140.

⁹ *Some Answered Questions* 201.

¹⁰ Qtd. in *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford University Press, 1958) 2: 12.

reflection,” Bahá’u’lláh reminds us, “is preferable to seventy years of pious worship.”¹¹ In his acknowledgments Hatcher saves his deepest gratitude for his wife Lucia, his daughter Helen Grace, and his son James Varqá for understanding why he had to keep the door of his study shut from breakfast until 2pm. Now with the publication of *The Arc of Ascent*, it can finally stand open not to his family alone, but to all the world. One thinks here of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s remark concerning the evolution of the soul from its infancy to its maturity in this day:

Every imperfect soul is self-centred and thinketh only of his own good. But as his thoughts expand a little he will begin to think of the welfare and comfort of his family. If his ideas still more widen, his concern will be the felicity of his fellow citizens, and if still they widen, he will be thinking of the glory of his land and his race. But when ideas and views reach the utmost degree of expansion and attain the stage of perfection, then will he be interested in the exaltation of humankind. He will then be the well-wisher of all men and the seeker of the weal and prosperity of all lands. This is indicative of perfection.¹²

There is no greater evidence of the inevitable triumph of the Bahá’í Faith than the perfection of the soul that is now required if the human race is to survive. And when the condition of the soul governs physical survival, the spiritual and the physical finally merge, the physical becoming the sign and the gauge of the spiritual. The bringing of them into a conscious psyche/soma alignment, the one the counterpart of the other, is, for Hatcher (as now for many others in the healing professions), the underlying purpose of physical reality. This integration-matter become spirit-is destined to reach its conscious perfection in a global society that is now, like the woman in Revelation (12:1–2), clothed with the sun and the moon under her feet, “travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.” The child to whom she gives birth, declares ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, is the Báb, the Primal Point around which all the revelations of the Adamic cycle revolve like the still point of the compass that makes the circle complete. That Hatcher should see the human analogue of this divine process in the creative process of writing (“both the artistic process and the Bahá’í paradigm of human advancement are essentially the same mechanism” [32]) suggests whose metaphorical presence he was in during those hours in which the door of his study remained at once physically shut and spiritually open.

¹¹ *Kitab-i-Iqan* 238.

¹² *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, comp. Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Marzieh Gail (Bahá’í World Centre, 1978) 69.