

B



BAHÁ'Í

The Bahá'í faith, a new and growing world religion, holds the unity and harmony of science and religion as one of its core principles. Science and religion, according to the Bahá'í teachings, are both equally necessary for humanity to progress. Science is the discoverer of the material and the spiritual reality of things, and it is the foundation of material and spiritual development. Religion develops both the individual and society, fostering the love, fellowship, and will that is necessary for humanity to advance. Science and religion counterbalance each other: Religion without science leads to superstition, whereas science without religion leads to materialism.

Historical origins

The Bahá'í faith originated in nineteenth-century Iran at a time when the country was struggling with economic and political instability, conflict between the religious and secular segments of society, and Russian and British expansionist policies. Iran was in decline under the Qajar dynasty when the Bábí millenarian movement was founded in 1844 by the Báb (Siyyid 'Alí Muhammad, 1819–1850). The rapid rise of the Bábí movement and its prophecy of the coming of a world redeemer led to violent suppression, with its leaders either killed or sent into exile, as was the case for Bahá'u'lláh (Mírzá Husayn 'Alí, 1817–1892).

Bahá'u'lláh nursed the decimated Iranian Bábí community back to health from nearby Baghdad

but was further exiled to Constantinople (modern Istanbul), to Adrianople (modern Edirne), and finally to Acre (modern Akko in Palestine). When he announced that he was the redeemer prophesied by the Báb, most of the Bábí community became Bahá'ís, followers of Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings were laid out in numerous books, epistles, and letters to a growing community. The central theme was unity: the unity of religion; the oneness of God; the unity of humanity; the equality of women and men; the need for a united world civilization, and the unity of science and religion. Religion promoted amity and concord as its chief aim, and this required the unfettered search after truth and the elimination of prejudice and superstition characteristic of science.

By the early twentieth century, the Bahá'í faith had spread around the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921)—Bahá'u'lláh's eldest son and successor—traveled and spoke widely throughout Europe and North America, emphasizing that religion must be progressive. The great progress in technical and material spheres wrought by science necessitated similar progress in religion. “When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science,” he told his audiences, “then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles” (1969, p. 146). Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957) succeeded 'Abdu'l-Bahá. After his death, leadership passed to the Universal House of Justice seated in Haifa, Israel.

Bahá'í teachings about science and religion

The teachings of the Bahá'í faith are “founded upon the unity of science and religion and upon investigation of truth.” Science and religion are like the two wings of one bird: “A bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless. Any religion that contradicts science or that is opposed to it, is only ignorance—for ignorance is the opposite of knowledge. Religion which consists only of rites and ceremonies of prejudice is not the truth” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 1969 p. 129).

The Bahá'í writings describe science as “the discoverer of realities,” the means by which humanity explores and understands both material and spiritual phenomena:

The virtues of humanity are many, but science is the most noble of them all. . . . It is a bestowal of God; it is not material; it is divine. Science is an effulgence of the Sun of Reality, the power of investigating and discovering the verities of the universe, the means by which man finds a pathway to God. Through intellectual and intelligent inquiry science is the discoverer of all things. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 1982 p. 49)

The purpose of religion is to “safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men” (Bahá'u'lláh, 1978, p. 168). Human nature is fundamentally spiritual, and the “spiritual impulses set in motion by such transcendent figures as Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Muhammad have been the chief influence in the civilizing of human character” (Bahá'í International Community). Religion and spiritual commitment are necessary if the fruits of science are to be used for the advancement of humanity: “In every sphere of human activity and at every level, the insights and skills that represent scientific accomplishment must look to the force of spiritual commitment and moral principle to ensure their appropriate application” (Bahá'í International Community).

Religious truth must be understood in the light of science and reason if it is not to become superstition and a source of discord. Religious doctrines that disagree with science are likely to disagree with doctrines of other religions, creating and sustaining religious conflict. However, this does not

mean the current scientific point of view is necessarily fully correct, nor does it mean that truth is limited to only what science can explain.

Similarly, science alone is inadequate. Doctrines inspired by science—most notably, the view that only material things are real—have had pernicious and corrosive effects when imposed on the people of the world. These doctrines need to be counteracted by the truths of religion. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Paris Talks* emphasized that “with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1969, p. 143). Furthermore, the commitment and the will that derives from religion is required if the results of science are to be applied to the benefit of the people of the world.

Evolution and the emergence of humanity.

The Bahá'í writings address in depth the issue of evolution and the emergence of humanity—a major source of conflict between science and contemporary religion. Humanity is described as emerging by a gradual progression that starts at a simple material stage and advances degree by degree to the human stage. In each stage, according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, humanity develops capacity for advancement to the next stage: “While in the kingdom of the mineral he was attaining the capacity for promotion into the degree of the vegetable. In the kingdom of the vegetable he underwent preparation for the world of the animal, and from thence he has come onward to the human degree, or kingdom” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, p. 225). Evolutionary processes—indeed, all natural processes—are the expression of God’s will and the mechanism for the unfolding of God’s creation:

Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment. Nature is God’s Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world (Bahá'u'lláh, p. 142).

Humanity, therefore, was created by God and potentially existed even before being actualized as a “composition of the atoms of the elements.”

Humans and animals are distinct and different kinds of beings, according to the Bahá'í view. It is incorrect to say that humans are descended from animals, even though physically that is the case. This is because humans have a rational

and spiritual side in addition to the physical reality they share with animals: “The reality of man is his thought, not his material body. The thought force and the animal force are partners. Although man is part of the animal creation, he possesses a power of thought superior to all other created beings” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1969, p. 17). The Bahá’í point of view therefore diverges from understandings of evolution that see no distinction between humans and animals. It reconciles two perspectives—natural evolution and divine creation—that many have deemed irremediably in conflict.

Types of knowledge. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes human knowledge as being of two kinds. One kind “is the knowledge of things perceptible to the senses.” The other kind “is intellectual—that is to say, it is a reality of the intellect; it has no outward form and no place and is not perceptible to the senses” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1981, p. 83). The knowledge that people have of the laws of the universe is such an intellectual reality, as is the knowledge of God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further describes four criteria for knowledge: sense perception (empiricism), reason (rationality), tradition, and inspiration. By itself, each criterion is inadequate: The senses can be fooled, reasonable thinkers differ, understanding of tradition is reasoned and gives differing interpretations, and the heart’s promptings are not reliable. Only when evidence from all criteria is in agreement can a proof be trusted as reliable.

The Bahá’í model of how reliable knowledge is obtained gives a perspective for viewing the roles of science and religion in society. Purely empirical approaches or rational approaches to knowledge, even when combined as they are in science, are inadequate to meet social needs. Approaches based solely on tradition—prophetic or otherwise—or intuition and feeling are likewise inadequate. Rather, contributions from all the approaches are needed. Neither science nor religion separately provides the broad foundations by which society can progress. Both are needed.

Conclusion

The task facing humanity, according to the Universal House of Justice, the global Bahá’í administrative body, “is to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence.” Carrying out this task requires “a progressive interaction between the truths and

principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry.” Science provides the understanding and technical capabilities that allow humanity to overcome the limitations of nature, making the goal of a peaceful and just world civilization an achievable one. Religion provides the moral, ethical, and spiritual strength, the discipline, and the commitment that are necessary if the goal is to become a reality.

See also EMERGENCE

Bibliography

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Paris Talks: Addresses Given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris in 1911–1912*, 11th edition. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1969.
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*. Haifa, Israel: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978.
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*, 3rd edition. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981.
- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, 2nd edition. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982.
- Bahá’u’lláh. *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh revealed after the Kitáb-í-Aqdas*. Haifa, Israel: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978.
- Bahá’í International Community. *The Prosperity of Humankind: A Statement Prepared by the Bahá’í International Community Office of Public Information*. Haifa, Israel: Bahá’í International Community, 1995.
- Universal House of Justice. *Letters of the Universal House of Justice*. Haifa, Israel: Bahá’í World Centre, 1992.

STEPHEN R. FRIBERG

BEAUTY

Beauty, according to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (c. 427–347 B.C.E.), is the most accessible of the Forms. Forms are transcendent sources of the essential qualities of things, the qualities that make things what they are. The proper relation among these qualities, their harmony, is what makes a thing beautiful. We are naturally drawn to beautiful things, wanting to possess them and to perpetuate their beauty in creations of our own. Our love of beauty leads us to seek it in increasingly more enduring forms of enjoyment and creation: from particular physical objects to friends