



STUDIES IN  
*Bahá'í*  
PHILOSOPHY

Selected Articles

GLOBAL FAITH BOOK SERIES

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BAHÁ'Í PHILOSOPHY**

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Vol. 1 Studies in Bahá'í Philosophy



# STUDIES IN BAHÁ'Í PHILOSOPHY

*Selected Articles*

*Edited and with an Introduction  
by Mikhail Sergeev*



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## STUDIES IN BAHÁ'Í PHILOSOPHY

### *Selected Articles*

(Global Faith Book Series. Vol. 1)

Editor: Mikhail Sergeev, *University of the Arts (Philadelphia)*

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Sixth Wave: Bahá'í Scriptural Philosophy

MIKHAIL SERGEEV

*University of the Arts*

#### ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith is a modern religion, which was founded by Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí, 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 secured 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 built on the democratic foundations. 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, “[t]here are more than 5 million Bahá'ís in the world. The Bahá'í Faith is established in virtually every country and in many dependent territories and overseas apartments of countries. Bahá'ís reside in well over 100,000 localities. About 2,100 indigenous tribes, races, and ethnic groups are represented in the Bahá'í community.” (“Statistics,” Bahá'í World

News Service. Media Information, <http://news.bahai.org/media-information/statistics>.)

## BAHÁ'Í PHILOSOPHY

Depending upon their epistemological foundations philosophical systems can be divided into five types: empiricist (Locke), rationalist (Descartes), intuitivist (Bergson), traditionalist (Confucius), and scriptural (Aquinas). Hindu thinkers should be credited with the invention of scriptural philosophy.

The beginning of Hindu religious philosophy could be traced back to the seventh century before Christ — to Kapila (c. 700), a legendary founder of Sāmkhya school of Hindu thought. Sāmkhya was one of the six traditional schools of Hindu religious philosophy. Tradition considers Kapila to be the originator of the school and attributes to him the authorship of *The Sāmkhya-pravacana Sūtra*. The essence of the Sāmkhya system consisted in reducing the variety of objects in the universe to two basic elements — spirit and matter — different combinations of which produce the world's colorful multiplicity.

The purpose of Hindu philosophy was to defend the validity and truth of Hindu scriptural texts by means of rational arguments. That was, for example, the task of Jaimini (c. 400 B.C.) — the author of *Mīmāṃsā Sūtra*, which belonged to Pūrvā-Mīmāṃsā school of Hinduism. One of the six traditional schools of Hindu philosophy, Pūrvā-Mīmāṃsā was preoccupied with religious obligations, as they have been outlined in the Vedas and other scriptural texts. Philosophical arguments of the mīmāṃsikas reflected their pragmatic concerns and focused on the proofs of the validity of scriptures.

In Western philosophical tradition Philo (Judeus) of Alexandria (B.C. 20) is considered the first scriptural philosopher. An Orthodox Jewish thinker, Philo was strongly influenced by the ancient Greek intellectual tradition. These dual loyalties determined the peculiar character of Philo's thought that can be described as "scriptural philosophy." Philo interpreted Hebrew

Scriptures allegorically in his effort to synthesize Jewish wisdom and Hellenistic thought. More specifically, he tried to support the revelation of Moses by the philosophical arguments of Plato and the Stoics. Philo taught, for instance, that God first created man in His own mind (Logos) and only then as a person possessing body and soul. The highest human aspiration, according to Philo, consists in overcoming physical limitations and returning to divine origins by means of intellectual contemplation.

In the history of philosophy there were five major waves of scriptural reasoning — Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. In this context Bahá'í philosophy represents the sixth wave, and it finds itself in a fruitful dialogue not only with the traditional forms of religious philosophy but also with modern Western thought which is based solely on reason and empirical observation.

In this collection the reader will find articles on various aspects of Bahá'í philosophy — philosophical anthropology, philosophy of science, philosophy of culture, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of religion, comparative and political philosophy, and, finally, history of philosophy. The authors of those articles — Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í scholars — reflect global aspirations of this religion by representing diverse countries of the world — USA, Canada, France, Italy, and Sweden. This collection of articles also introduces a Global Faith Book Series which publishes works on various aspects of the Bahá'í Faith and globalization.

**Human Nature And World Religion:  
Toward A Bahá'í-Inspired Philosophical  
Anthropology**

**HAROLD ROSEN**

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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 Bahá'í 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 pres-

ent 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...”<sup>1</sup>

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 de-

<sup>1</sup> Psalm 8, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Revised Standard Version), editors H.G. May and B.M. Metzger (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

sire... 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."<sup>2</sup>

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!" (Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2)<sup>3</sup> 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."<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, editors J.B Ross and M.M. McLaughlin (New York: The Viking Press, 1967), 478.

<sup>3</sup> *The Works of William Shakespeare (Complete)*, William Shakespeare (Roslyn, NY: Black's Readers Service, 1972), 1141.

<sup>4</sup> *One Common Faith, The Universal House of Justice*. (Thornhill, Ontario: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 2005), 23.

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 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 metaphysic 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."<sup>5</sup> 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." (Lankavatara Sutra 61)<sup>6</sup>

Or: "The Absolute is unlimited and unceasing."<sup>7</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> Udana 80, quoted in *World Scripture: A Comparative Anthology of Sacred Texts*, edited by Andrew Wilson, et al, (New York: Paragon House), 48.

<sup>6</sup> Lankavatara Sutra 61, quoted in *World Scripture*, 102.

<sup>7</sup> Lion's Roar of Queen Srimala 5, quoted in *World Scripture*, 466.

Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”<sup>8</sup> “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and from whom we exist.”<sup>9</sup> “I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.”<sup>10</sup> 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.”<sup>11</sup> “He is the First and the Last, the Evident and the Immanent: and He has full knowledge of all things.”<sup>12</sup> “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.”<sup>13</sup> 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 Ancient Being and the Fathomless Mystery. “Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God.”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> And:

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<sup>8</sup> Ephesians 4.6, *Oxford Annotated Bible*, op cit.

<sup>9</sup> 1st Corinthians 8.6, *ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> Revelation 1.8, *ibid*.

<sup>11</sup> Qur'an 6.103, translated by Abdullah Yusuf Ali, (Elmhurst, NY: Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an, Inc, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Qur'an 57.3, *ibid*.

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 59.23–24, *ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> Baha'u'llah. *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2005), section 93.1.

<sup>15</sup> Baha'u'llah. *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1991), 37.

Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehends 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." (Gleanings 19.1)<sup>16</sup>

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 who have attained the desire-less and un-describable realm of Nirvana. The Realm of Form (Rupadhatu) is described as heavens occupied by celestial beings,

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<sup>16</sup> Gleanings 19.1, op cit.

higher states of awareness and exalted meditative states.<sup>17</sup> The Buddha represents the Wisdom and Compassion of this realm. “He who sees the Dharma sees me; and he who sees me sees the Dharma.”<sup>18</sup> “The Tathagata (Path-Maker or Way-Shower) is the victor unvanquished, the absolute seer, the perfectly self-controlled one.”<sup>19</sup> “The Buddha will not die; the Buddha will continue to live in the holy body of the law.”<sup>20</sup> 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.”<sup>21</sup> 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.”<sup>22</sup> He also declared, “My kingship is not of this world.”<sup>23</sup> 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup> Such Holy Books are

<sup>17</sup> *Encyclopedia of Religion*. 1st ed., Mircea Eliade, editor (New York: Macmillan, 1987).

<sup>18</sup> Samyutta Nikaya 3.120, quoted in *World Scripture*, 465.

<sup>19</sup> Digha Nikaya 3.135, quoted in *The God of Buddha*, J.M. Fozdar (New York: Asia Publishing House, 1973), 26.

<sup>20</sup> Digha Nikaya 1.46, quoted in *The God of Buddha*, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 4.4, *Oxford Annotated Bible*, op cit.

<sup>22</sup> John 12.50, *ibid*.

<sup>23</sup> John 18.36, *ibid*.

<sup>24</sup> Hebrews 1.3, *ibid*.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'an 56.80, op cit.

said to come to humanity at intervals: “for each period is a Book (revealed).”<sup>26</sup> Acceptance of the Messenger is understood as following the will of God. “He who obeys the Messenger, obeys God.”<sup>27</sup> 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.”<sup>28</sup> 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.

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.<sup>29</sup> 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

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<sup>26</sup> Qur’an 13.38, op cit.

<sup>27</sup> Qur’an 4.80, op cit.

<sup>28</sup> Qur’an 9.33, op cit.

<sup>29</sup> Adib Taherzadeh. *The Revelation of Baha’u’llah: Baghdad 1853–63*, Vol. 1 (Oxford: George Ronald, 1980), 55–60.

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 the rolling wheel of a cart, fixed by the pin of its axle."<sup>30</sup> Impermanent and transitory are all phenomenal realities.<sup>31</sup> "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."<sup>32</sup> 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

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<sup>30</sup> Sutta Nipata 654, quoted in *World Scripture*, op cit, 102.

<sup>31</sup> John Powers. *A Concise Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oneworld Books, 2000), article on Anitya, 21.

<sup>32</sup> Dhammapada 49, translated by Juan Mascaro (London: Penguin Books, 1973).

‘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.”<sup>33</sup> “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it... have dominion over... every living thing that moves upon the earth.”<sup>34</sup> 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.”<sup>35</sup> “It is God Who causeth the seed-grain and the date-stone to split and sprout.”<sup>36</sup> “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.”<sup>37</sup> 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 system is one.”<sup>38</sup> “Every

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<sup>33</sup> Romans 1.20, *Oxford Annotated Bible*, op cit.

<sup>34</sup> Genesis 1.38, *ibid*.

<sup>35</sup> Qur’an 2.164, op cit.

<sup>36</sup> Qur’an 6.95, *ibid*.

<sup>37</sup> Qur’an 30.25, *ibid*.

<sup>38</sup> Abdul-Baha. *Some Answered Questions*, compiled and translated by Laura Clifford Barney, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2004), 198.



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.”<sup>39</sup> “Arts, crafts and sciences uplift the world of being, and are conducive to its exaltation.”<sup>40</sup>

### **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.”<sup>41</sup> 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

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<sup>39</sup> 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.

<sup>40</sup> Baha'u'llah. *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1988), 26.

<sup>41</sup> *World Scripture*, op cit, 212.

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.”<sup>42</sup>

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 hearts to their Lord with resolve and serene faith.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.”<sup>46</sup>

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,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 203.

<sup>43</sup> Sukhavativyuha, summarized from *Buddhist Scriptures*, edited by Edward Conze (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1959), 232–36.

<sup>44</sup> Revelation 21, *Oxford Annotated Bible*, op cit.

<sup>45</sup> Qur’an 21.104, op cit and *Kitab al-Irshad*, quoted in Moojan Momen, *The Phenomenon of Religion: A Thematic Approach* (Oxford: Oneworld Publishing, 1999), 253.

<sup>46</sup> Gleanings 4.1, op cit.

since all things are within our nature.”<sup>47</sup> 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.”<sup>48</sup> “Even as rain breaks not through a well-thatched house, passions break not through a well-guarded mind.”<sup>49</sup> “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.”<sup>50</sup>

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.”<sup>51</sup> 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 which dwells in my members.”<sup>52</sup> 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.”<sup>53</sup> We are called to contribute to the creation, using our unique gifts fruitfully. “Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.”<sup>54</sup>

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-

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<sup>47</sup> Sutra of Hui Neng 2, quoted in *World Scripture*, op cit, 212.

<sup>48</sup> Dhammapada 327, op cit.

<sup>49</sup> Dhammapada 14, ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Dhammapada 166, ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Galatians 5.23, *Oxford Annotated Bible*, op cit.

<sup>52</sup> Romans 7.23, ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Romans 8.5, ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Romans 12.6, op cit.

selves the center all things. “Do ye not see that God has... made His bounties flow to you in exceeding measure, (both) seen and unseen?”<sup>55</sup> “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.”<sup>56</sup> 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.”<sup>57</sup> “We test you by evil and by good, by way of trial.”<sup>58</sup>

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.”<sup>59</sup> “Man — the true man — is soul, not body.”<sup>60</sup> “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.”<sup>61</sup> 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, Baha’u’llah.

The terms ‘soul’, ‘human reality’, ‘human spirit’, ‘rational faculty’, ‘mind’ and ‘heart’ are used somewhat interchangeably in Bahá’í scriptures. What endowments, capacities and responsi-

<sup>55</sup> Qur’an 31.20, op cit.

<sup>56</sup> Qur’an 6.165, op cit.

<sup>57</sup> Qur’an 12.53, op cit.

<sup>58</sup> Qur’an 21.35, op cit.

<sup>59</sup> Abdul-Baha in *Bahá’í Prayers* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, IL, 1991), 103.

<sup>60</sup> Abdul-Baha in *Paris Talks* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing, 2006), section 28.6.

<sup>61</sup> Gleanings 27.2, op cit.

bilities 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."<sup>62</sup> 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."<sup>63</sup> 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.

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<sup>62</sup> Abdul-Baha in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 1990), 2.

<sup>63</sup> *Paris Talks* 28.15–16, op cit.

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 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.<sup>64</sup>

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."<sup>65</sup> 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."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> *Paris Talks* 31.1–6, *ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> Abdul-Baha in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, compiled by Howard McNutt, (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing, 2007), 222.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

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.<sup>67</sup>

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

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid, 295–96.

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 Bahá’í 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 di-



rection, waiting appropriately, reasoning, controlling the horses according to immediate conditions, and ultimately wishing to 'live in the light' like the white horse.<sup>68</sup> 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.

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<sup>68</sup> From Plato's "The Phaedrus," quoted and summarized in *Real Philosophy: An Anthology of the Universal Search for Meaning*, edited by J. Needleman and J. Appelbaum (London: Arkana Penguin, London, 1990), 24–28.

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Depending upon their epistemological foundations philosophical systems can be divided into five types: empiricist (Locke), rationalist (Descartes), intuitivist (Bergson), traditionalist (Confucius), and scriptural (Aquinas). In the history of philosophy there were five major waves of scriptural reasoning—Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. In this context Bahá'í philosophy represents the sixth wave, and it finds itself in a fruitful dialogue not only with the traditional forms of religious philosophy but also with modern Western thought which is based solely on reason and empirical observation.

In this collection the reader will find articles on various aspects of Bahá'í philosophy—philosophical anthropology, philosophy of science, philosophy of culture, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of religion, comparative and political philosophy, and, finally, history of philosophy. The authors of those articles—Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í scholars—reflect global aspirations of this religion by representing diverse countries of the world—USA, Canada, France, Italy, and Sweden. This collection of articles also introduces a Global Faith Book Series which publishes works on various aspects of the Bahá'í Faith and globalization.



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