

The Origin of the Bahá'í Principle of the Harmony between Science and Religion

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Dear Friends,

I am greatly honored with this opportunity to share with you today some of the results of my investigation of the Bahá'í principle of the harmony between science and religion. In examining this principle, I propose to do three things:

- (1) Find the origin of this principle in Islamic and Bahá'í Writings
- (2) Share a newly translated Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this subject
- (3) Discuss some of its implications.

1. The Origin of the Principle of Harmony between Science and Religion

I believe this principle is based upon the Islamic religious and mystical doctrine of “two books.” (Bear in mind that there may also be pre-Islamic precedents to this doctrine.) According to this doctrine, nature (or creation), is one Book wherein God has inscribed His signs and expressed His will, and Revelation (or religion) is another Book wherein God has done the same. Since both books derive from the same Source—God—they therefore cannot, in essence, be in conflict.

The Muslim mystic Ibn 'Arabi says: “*The cosmos is a divine book inscribed,*” and all things therein are “*signs*” and “*traces*” (*áyát* and *athár*) which point to God (quoted in Chittick, *Self-Disclosure of God*, p. 5). The Koran says: “*We shall show them Our signs in the world and in themselves, until it is clear to them that He is God.*” (41:53)

It is no accident that these two terms—“signs” and “traces” (*áyát* and *athár*)—are used both to describe the verses of God revealed in the Written Book and the signs of God manifest in the Book of Nature.

In another place, Ibn 'Arabi calls everything besides God a “messenger” (*rasúl*). He says: “*In this waystation [of the signs] is found the knowledge of the messages scattered throughout the cosmos. Nothing walks in the cosmos without walking as a messenger with a message....Even worms in their movements are rushing with a message to those who understand it.*” (SDG, p. 4)

Similar sentiments are expressed by Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet of Wisdom:

“Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it, and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder.” (Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 141)

A few lines later in that same Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh says:

“Nature is God’s Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.” (p. 142)

These are clear statements about nature being a book of God, with messages inscribed in it by its Creator.

And from the pen of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá we have an explicit endorsement of the Islamic mystical doctrine of two books:

“There are two Books: one is the Book of Creation and the other is the Written Book. The Written Book consisteth of the heavenly scriptures which are revealed to the Prophets of God and have issued forth from the lips of His Manifestations. The Book of Creation is the preserved Tablet and the outspread Roll of existence. The Book of Creation is in accord with the Written Book.”

(quoted in B. Nakhjavani, *Response*, p. 13, I have slightly modified the translation, the original text of which can be found in *Makátib*, vol. 1, pp. 436-437)

In summary, then, we can see that the Book which science examines and whose truths it points to is the Book of Creation (or Nature), and the Book which religion examines and whose truths it expounds is the Written Book, and since both have emanated from the same Creator, they must be in essential harmony. That is, they are complementary and not contradictory to each other. This doctrine of two books, I believe, is the origin of the Bahá’í principle of the harmony of science and religion.

2. A Newly Translated Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on this Principle¹

O dear handmaiden of God! Your letter has arrived and from the rose-garden of inner meanings a fragrant perfume has been inhaled. In Paris it is necessary to manifest absolute purity and detachment in order for souls to become cleansed and purified from the defilement of passion and desire, for in that city people are extremely heedless and are engrossed in satisfying the cravings of self. But if an angelic power is manifested, it will certainly have a pervasive influence, and those souls will become quickened through the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Assuredly, exert the utmost effort so that dead souls may come to life, the blind may see, and the deaf may hear.

¹ This Tablet is also online at bahai-library.com/abdulbaha_brown_science_religion.

You have asked how we can harmonize scientific theories (*afkár-i-faylasúfi*) with the ideas of religion (*afkár-i-diyánatí*). Know that this material world is the mirror of the Kingdom, and each of these worlds is in complete correspondence with the other. The correct theories of this world which are the result of sound scientific thinking are in agreement with the divine verses (*áthár-i-malakútiyyih*) without the slightest divergence between them, for the truth of all things is laid away in the treasuries of the Kingdom. When that truth is manifested in the material world, the archetypes (*a'yán*) and realities (*haqá'iq*) of beings attain realization. If a scientific theory does not correspond with [the intent of] the divine verses, it is certain that it is the essence of error.

Consider how after centuries and ages it has now become clear and evident, due to the careful examination and investigation of scientists, that certain explicit divine utterances are correct while certain scientific theories are wrong. For example, when the Qur'án was revealed some of its verses were found to contradict current scientific views, for according to that sacred book the earth and all other celestial bodies are in motion and the sun moves around its own center.² The scientists of that time considered these verses to be in conflict with science, for in that age the rules of Ptolemy in astronomy were universally accepted. The clear text of the Qur'án, however, was in opposition to these rules. It was only after centuries and ages that astronomers investigated the matter more carefully and fashioned observational instruments by which they were able to discover the true conditions and motions of the planets. It became obvious, then, that the Qur'án had described the actual facts, while contemporary scientific theories had been entirely erroneous. This is because the rules of Ptolemy in astronomy were based upon the immobility of the earth and the revolution of the sun around it, whereas the Qur'án states that the earth moves and that the sun has an axial motion. If you understood Arabic I would quote those verses, but since you do not know that language, I have explained their import.

As for the many planets and the vast distances between them which [certain] European astronomers of our day explain as worlds wherein the soul dwells, this is a pure supposition and has no basis in fact, for all of the planets are physical worlds. The world in which the soul resides is perpetual and unchanging. It is a spiritual world; it is the world of the Kingdom, which is eternal and everlasting. All the luminous bodies existing in this infinite universe are composed of elements, and since every composition in the end must become decomposed, they are therefore deprived of immortality. The world of the Kingdom, however, is free and sanctified from composition, and is therefore eternal and everlasting.

In regard to the phenomenon of death, know that the soul of man is sanctified and independent from material existence. It has no need to enter or exit, ascend or descend, penetrate or commingle, for these are the properties of bodies, not of souls. Therefore, the soul of man does not enter into this corporeal frame, but rather it has a connection to it. Death consists of the severing of that connection. That connection resembles the relationship between a mirror and the sun. The sun does not enter into or depart from

² The two Qur'ánic verses referred to are: "And the sun moves in a fixed place of its own" (36:38); and "All swim in a celestial sphere" (36:40). This translation reflects 'Abdu'l-Bahá's understanding of these verses and does not necessarily accord with other modern translations.

the mirror, and does not incarnate itself therein, but has a connection to the mirror and is reflected within it. When that connection becomes severed, the mirror is deprived of its brilliance, loveliness, and charm. For this reason, the expression “the soul has departed from the body” is metaphorical and not factual. Furthermore, the connection between the soul and the body may be severed gradually or it may be severed all at once.

A letter to ... has been written and is enclosed so that you may send it to him. I beseech God that you may become an instrument for shedding the light of holiness upon the city of Paris. The glory of glories rest upon you.

(*Makátib*, vol. 3, pp. 172-173; provisional translation by Keven Brown)

Now I would like to offer some comments about some of the words and expressions found in this important Tablet.

- *afkár-i-faylasúfí*: *afkár* primarily means “thoughts” or “ideas” but it also can translate as “opinions” and “theories.” I chose “theories” here because of the normal association of this word with “scientific.” I have translated *faylasúfí* as “scientific” for two reasons: One is because a *faylasúf* (philosopher) in classical Islamic culture, though generally associated with the Greek philosophic tradition of using reason to discover truth, was also often a practicing scientist. Such men who observed nature and developed theories to explain it were either called *faylasúf* or *hakím*. Second, in the succeeding paragraph, 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives an example of *afkár-i-faylasúfí*, which is Ptolemy’s earth-centered cosmos, a pre-modern scientific theory which explained the universe quite well before the invention of telescopes.
- *Malakút* (the Kingdom of God): Besides indicating the abode of angelic souls, this term also sometimes refers to the station of the Primal Will, that timeless and placeless reality through which everything else in creation is called into existence. As such, it must have, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, a perfect correspondence to whatever exists in the worlds below it.
- *áthár*: *áthár* are “traces” inscribed by God both in nature (as “signs”) and in the Written Book (as “verses”). They give us hints and indications about God’s nature and purpose for His creation, but they do not reveal the truth in any absolute sense.
- *a’yán* and *haqá’iq* (archetypes and realities): these two terms come from Islamic philosophy and are equivalent, I believe, to Platonic Forms. In today’s terms, they are roughly equivalent to laws of nature. Such realities exist as timeless possibilities or potentialities in the Kingdom until such time as the material environment is prepared and suited to manifest them.

A mutual and necessary relationship exists between this physical world and the immaterial, atemporal world of the Kingdom: timeless universal laws are needed for the unfoldment of creatures in time, and creatures in time are needed to realize the laws. An exact correspondence exists between these two realms.

3. Implications

Lastly, what are some of the implications of the Master's beloved words.

1. The true intent or meaning of the divine verses (traces from the Prophet's pen) must agree with the facts of nature (traces of the Book of Creation), and vice versa—both come from one source.
2. Given this, we must consider the problem of the subjectivity of human knowledge: 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that the four standards by which humans can judge whether or not a proposition is true (the senses, reason, scripture, and inspiration) are all incomplete by themselves. Only when we rely on all four can a proposition be judged to be correct. (see *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 253)

How well can any of us claim to fully use each of the four standards of knowledge when judging the truth of something? This means that although it is our duty to attempt to harmonize religion and science (the two books), we must never allow ourselves to become dogmatic or hold to absolute convictions. The reconciliation of science and religion will come closer and closer in time, but it will also never, I believe, be absolutely attained, nor is this perhaps desirable. The point of this principle, I believe, is to recognize that science and religion are mutually necessary and complementary, but it does not mean that they are equivalent, or worse, that one should dominate the other.

What Bahá'u'lláh and the Prophets have given us are signs and traces (athár) pointing to the realities of the Kingdom and to God, but they have not given us the truth itself. Nature, likewise, gives us signs and traces, which scientists and philosophers interpret and from which they construct hypotheses, but it does not give us the truth itself. As Plato stated so well in *The Republic*, this world is the realm of opinion and belief, which imperfectly reflects the realm of true knowledge (the Kingdom).