

Reflections of a Human Spirit in a Male Body

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On the basis of all available historical evidence, it appears that the Bahá'í Faith is the first world religion to teach and proclaim unequivocally the equality of men and women. Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said:

He [Bahá'u'lláh] establishes the equality of men and women. This is peculiar to the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, for all other religions have placed man above woman.¹

Contemporaneously with the enunciation and proclamation of this religious teaching, there arose (primarily in the West) a largely secular movement towards the liberation of women which focused, broadly speaking, on the following theses: (1) throughout history, women have generally been oppressed by men and, among other things, have been systematically denied the opportunities for education, intellectual development, and participation in social or political affairs; (2) contemporary societies exhibit and enshrine many forms of gender discrimination, and these practices must be confronted and eliminated; (3) attitudes towards women based on a presumption of male superiority must be challenged, refuted, and eliminated.

The advancement of this wide-ranging woman's movement has proceeded on many fronts and taken many forms: social, political, sexual, religious, psychological. Moreover, except for a minority (largely within the confines of Western societies), males have either sabotaged or resisted this process, and it is women themselves who have had to assert their rights and insist on their prerogatives.

From the nineteenth-century beginnings of modern feminism until the present time, the relationship between secular feminism and the Bahá'í Faith has been checkered and unclear. On the one hand, Bahá'ís have wholly endorsed and supported such feminist goals as the right to vote or equal access to education and job opportunities. On the other hand, more recent tenets of some schools of feminism (which advocate such things as unrestricted sexual license) clearly contradict Bahá'í teachings concerning the sanctity and importance of marriage and the family (which teachings, let it be said, apply with equal stringency to men).

But the most fundamental problem in assessing feminism from the Bahá'í perspective lies in the fact that much literature on the subject (including some written by Bahá'ís) has taken the form of a feminist analysis of Bahá'í teachings rather than a Bahá'í analysis of feminist issues. It is not so much a question that this "one-way" relationship is unfair, but rather that it does not permit the unique contribution a truly spiritually-based perspective brings to the whole question of gender relations. Moreover, even in those instances when a religious analysis is attempted, the Bahá'í viewpoint is often assimilated to the general religious perspective derived from the traditional religious communities which never taught gender equality and which are struggling within themselves to define and articulate their own view of the question.

The present article represents a small attempt to reverse this trend and to address the question of feminism frankly from a Bahá'í perspective. Our premise is that the Bahá'í

teachings offer a unique spiritually-based understanding of the issue and articulate important insights of potential interest to all feminists.

The Oneness of Humankind Revisited

Any two entities in existence may be compared according to their degree of similarity or their degree of difference. Moreover, any two existents share at least some things in common (if nothing else, the fact that they both exist). Yet, no matter how similar, any two existents must differ in some respects (otherwise there would only be one identical existent and not two, and thus nothing to compare in the first place).

Not only is there the question of the objective degree of similarity or difference between two existents, there is also the subjective question of what one chooses to emphasize when articulating a given comparison. In particular, for any mutual encounter between two human beings, the two parties involved always have a choice of whether to focus on their differences or on their similarities.

The pivotal teaching of the Bahá'í Faith is the oneness of humankind. Among the implications of this teaching is the *similarity principle*: that which any two human beings have in common is greater and more important than whatever differentiates them. In other words, close your eyes and pick any two human beings anywhere on earth. What they have in common — their essential human nature — is far more important than whatever separates them, whether cultural, physical, psychological, social, or religious.

The basis of the oneness principle, and its derivative, the similarity principle, is a God-created human nature that is intrinsic (to every individual) and universal (shared by all humans). This universal and essential human nature resides within the nonmaterial, immortal soul or spirit of each human being, and the fundamental or defining capacity of the soul is its ability to reflect or mirror all of the attributes of God:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He [God], through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to Love Him -- a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and primary purpose underlying the whole of creation. . . Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He 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 enduring a bounty.²

Elsewhere, the Bahá'í writings make it clear that the term "man" in this and other similar passages is strictly generic: "*Man* is a generic term applying to all humanity."³ Thus, the "reality of man" referred to above is the nonphysical soul (or spirit) of the individual, and this soul is exalted above and independent of all physical limitations.⁴ It follows that the soul's essential capacity of reflecting all the attributes of God is wholly independent of whether a particular soul is attached to a male or a female body. This fact means that we are all essentially and fundamentally human before we are specifically and secondarily male or female.

Thus, any comparison between men and women that focuses primarily on their differences, without taking into consideration their fundamental identity as humans, is bound to be faulty and unbalanced. In the Bahá'í conception, men and woman *are* absolutely equal because their essential spiritual reality and capacity are literally the same: gender equality is a preestablished and objective fact. Of course, this fact must be appropriately acknowledged and implemented on the social level, but the Bahá'í conception stands in significant contrast to the secular, psychosocial view that sees gender equality primarily as a subjective concept which will have objective existence *only* when it is socially established.

Indeed, in the absence of the framework that sees the essential reality of the individual as spiritual and pre-existent with respect to physical reality, sexual differentiation becomes the fundamental determinant of the human personality. In this case, the presumption of difference becomes the primary basis of the relationship between men and women. From this viewpoint, gender equity can only be achieved by overcoming objective differences rather than, as from the spiritual viewpoint, by recognizing and acknowledging that our common spiritual identity as human beings is prior to and more important than our sexual differentiation, regardless of whether the latter is ultimately attributed to biology, to socialization or to both.

The Historical Origins of Gender Inequities in Society

Nevertheless, the question remains: if gender equality is a preestablished fact of the human reality, why has this equality remained socially unrealized throughout history? Both secular feminism and the Bahá'í Faith give essentially the same answer to this question: man has persistently dominated woman throughout history and prevented her from exhibiting her true human capacity.

The world in the past has been ruled by force, and man has dominated over woman by reason of his more forceful and aggressive qualities. . . .⁵

In past ages . . . woman was considered inferior to man, even from the standpoint of her anatomy and creation. She was considered especially inferior in intelligence, and the idea prevailed universally that it was not allowable for her to step into the arena of important affairs. . . . The conditions in past centuries were due to woman's lack of opportunity. She was denied the right and privilege of education and left in her undeveloped state. Naturally, she could not and did not advance.⁶

Woman's lack of progress and proficiency has been due to her need of equal education and opportunity. Had she been allowed this equality, there is no doubt she would be the counterpart of man in ability and capacity.⁷

In the world of humanity . . . the female sex is treated as though inferior, and is not allowed equal rights and privileges. This condition is due not to nature, but to education. In the Divine Creation there is no such distinction. Neither sex is superior to the other in the sight of God. Why then should one sex assert the inferiority of the other, without just rights and privileges as though God had given His

authority for such a course of action? If women received the same educational advantages as those of men, the result would demonstrate the equality of capacity of both for scholarship.⁸

Thus, in spite of the fundamental and essential equality of capacity between men and women, men have used to their selfish advantage the fact that they are, in some ways, physically stronger than women. Men have abused this particular difference and used it to suppress the development of woman. The main feature of this suppression is the persistent denial of educational opportunities. However, it has also taken the form of outright physical domination and restriction.

The status of woman in former times was exceedingly deplorable, for it was the belief of the Orient that it was best for woman to be ignorant. It was considered preferable that she should not know reading or writing in order that she might not be informed of events in the world. Woman was considered to be created for rearing children and attending to the duties of the household. If she pursued educational courses, it was deemed contrary to chastity; hence women were made prisoners of the household. The houses did not even have windows opening upon the outside world.⁹

In other words, since men held power and controlled the parameters of public and social life, they were able to create a situation in which it *appeared* that the trivial and secondary physical differences between men and women reflected a truly fundamental difference in nature. This is the illusion that men sought to maintain and that modern feminism, both secular and religious, has challenged.

Redressing Gender Social Inequality

Although secular and religious feminism agree on the historic cause of social inequality between the sexes, the philosophical differences in their respective understandings of human nature have led to quite different approaches to the problem of redressing inequality. Because they discount the objective existence of the nonphysical soul — the only metaphysical basis for an objective, preexisting gender equality — many secular feminists have come to feel that the only way to establish gender equality is to prove that there are no objective differences whatever between the sexes. They have thus set themselves an impossible task *as a precondition and criterion for establishing social equality between the sexes*.

Viewed from any angle, this was and is a tragic mistake. In the first place, there obviously are objective differences between the sexes, and so the strategy of interpreting gender equality as absolute identity of function in all respects creates an easy target for those men (and women) who, for whatever reason, seek to discredit not only the particular methods but the very goals of feminism (whether secular or religious). Further, it dissipates energy by shifting the focus from the real problems that women face in their quest for social equality to quixotic attempts at proving, for example, that given enough training women can learn to be just as brutal at war as men have always been. This is doubtless true, but why

should women feel impelled to demonstrate such a thing? In what way does this enhance the status or value of women?

However, if we do take into account the existence of the soul and the objectivity of preexisting gender equality, as spiritually-based feminism does, then women can, from the very beginning, be secure in their identity. Rather than trying to "prove" their equality with chauvinist males by competing with the latter, spiritually-based feminists can focus on genuine self-affirmation and self-development. Women are then free to define themselves in their own terms rather than on the terms of the common-denominator male values, which do not even represent the best of men. Besides, most chauvinist males will never be convinced of the true capacity of females no matter what women do, because the chauvinist male is insensitive to superior and refined human values of any sort — whether male or female.

Let those who will brutalize each other. Why do the rest of us need to get involved? The more efficient killers will eventually eliminate each other and the rest of us can get on with living worthwhile lives.¹⁰ The very fact that some feminists feel impelled to prove themselves in these areas of male dominance gives undue importance to these crude values, and thereby negates one of the main services that spiritual feminism can render the human race: feminizing and refining the values of humanity as a whole.

Thus, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, for example, that "there are certain matters, the participation in which is not worthy of women,"¹¹ He clearly does not mean that women are *incapable* of doing these unworthy things. He says rather that because of women's greater sensitivity to human suffering (which is, in fact, one of the *superiorities* of women over men), it is socially destructive to subject women to certain experiences:

. . . woman has been denied the opportunities which man has so long enjoyed. . . . But even this is not always a shortcoming. Shall we consider it an imperfection and weakness in her nature that she is not proficient in the school of military tactics, that she cannot go forth to the field of battle and kill . . .? Nay, rather, is it not a compliment when we say that in hardness of heart and cruelty she is inferior to man? . . . Is this to be considered a fault and lack of qualification as man's equal? Yet be it known that if woman had been taught and trained in the military science of slaughter, she would have been the equivalent of man even in this accomplishment. But God forbid! May woman never attain this proficiency; may she never wield weapons of war, for the destruction of humanity is not a glorious achievement. . . . Let not a man glory in this, that he can kill his fellow creatures; nay rather let him glory in this, that he can love them.¹²

. . . it is the duty of men to organize and execute such defensive measures and not the women — because their hearts are tender and they cannot endure the sight of the horror of carnage, even if it is for the sake of defence. From such and similar undertakings the women are exempt.¹³

Clearly, these passages do not imply that because women are exempt from certain tasks, such as warfare, they must then compensate or reciprocate by withdrawing from political or social life. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá says clearly: "If given the same educational opportunities or

course of study, [women] would develop the same capacity and abilities [as men] . . . whether in scientific research, political ability or any other sphere of human activity."¹⁴ The point is that there are certain areas of activity where it is not worth the effort for women to go through the contortions of acquiring the same ability as men. Thus secular feminism, because it lacks adequate spiritual underpinnings, has in some instances fallen prey to the unspoken imperative that everything that can be done must in fact be done. Spiritually-based feminism, because it has knowledge of the preexisting condition of absolute human equality, has greater self-assurance and autonomy. It is not so driven by outer perceptions and is free to choose to concentrate on those areas of development which truly serve the cause of women and of humanity.

Confronting the History of Patriarchy

Another significant difference between secular and spiritually-based feminism arises when one confronts the following question: given the fact that men have dominated women in history, what of our collective cultural heritage should be changed or discarded, and what should be conserved?

Many secular feminists have come to the conclusion that all the cultural products of our history are hopelessly infected with "patriarchy" and must be discarded. From this point of view, everything in our history — be it logic, science, religion, or art — is a tool for the continued oppression of women, because these cultural products were produced by societies in which women were oppressed (the presumption being that these cultural products fatally contain oppressive elements).

This 'scorched earth' view of history discounts the fact that science, literature, music, and art were all products of the human spirit — the very same human spirit which constitutes the essential identity of both women and men. Patriarchy or male dominance was a product of what differentiates men from women — the greater physical strength and aggressiveness of males — but the higher-order cultural products of history were clearly the products of the universal human spirit. Indeed, the very refinement of these higher-order products of human culture precludes their production by something so crude as male aggression and physical force. Thus, from the point of view of spiritually-based feminism, women can and should feel just as much a sense of ownership of culture as do men.

Thus, the secular feminist view that our human cultural heritage is a product of patriarchy rather than our common humanity is an ideological interpretation of the facts of history. Even a cursory view of much feminist literature on this subject shows that very rarely, if ever, are logical links made between charges of patriarchy and a given cultural product. Rather, once any evidence of male bias is found in a society (a very easy thing to do, given our history), all cultural products of that society are held to be hopelessly infected with such biases. Let us cite an example from the author's own field of expertise, mathematics.

The secular feminist Sandra Harding has written extensively on the male bias she feels is to be found in science. In a particularly virulent passage, she stigmatizes Newton's *Principia* as "Newton's rape manual."¹⁵ The implicit reference is to the notorious statement of Bacon about torturing the secrets out of nature. Bacon, in turn, was referring to the nascent experimental method. Harding's argument is that Bacon's torture/rape metaphor applies to all of science and thus to Newton.

In fact, if one reads Newton's *Principia* (probably the greatest single work of science ever written), it is immediately clear that Harding's rape metaphor is totally nonapplicable and in fact ludicrous. Indeed, what Newton shows is that by means of a few elegant, subtle, and well-formulated axioms and principles, one can accede to certain basic structures of reality through pure logic, with hardly any need for recourse to observation, much less experimentation. For example, based on Newton's theory, a few simple calculations enable us to place a communications satellite in a fixed position with respect to the earth's rotation. Thus Newton showed us how it is possible by pure thought to gain maximum knowledge of reality from a minimum of experimental fuss.

As for literature and the arts, these cultural products can clearly be judged on their own merits, regardless of whether the human spirit that produced them happened to be in a male body. How indeed could the lyricism of Tchaikowsky's *Serenade for Strings*, the ethereal joy of Bach's *B-Minor Mass*, or the noble simplicity of Beethoven's *Ode to Joy* be reasonably held to be the product of male aggressiveness or oppressive patriarchy (regardless of whatever failures or limitations these artists had as individual human beings)?

The recognition that the higher-order products of human culture were creations of the generic human spirit cannot, however, compensate for or justify the tremendous loss to our history of what exceptionally creative women could have produced but were prevented by contrived circumstances from doing. Indeed, given the well-established fact that exceptional creativity is normally distributed and that half of humanity has always been female, the systematic denial of equal education for women amounts to the suppression of roughly half of all the exceptionally creative human spirits in history. How, then, can we ever measure what we have lost forever as a result of the historical persistence of patriarchy? Just as women should feel an equal sense of cultural ownership as men, men should feel the loss of female creativity to history just as keenly as (if not more than) do women.¹⁶

The Psychosexual Basis of Male Dominance

Although there clearly have been cultural differences in the social expression of male dominance in history, it is nevertheless the case that such male dominance has existed to various degrees in virtually all cultures and at all epochs. This ubiquity and persistence of male dominance suggests that it must have a transcultural origin or basis. Indeed, why is it that males have felt it necessary to suppress woman or deny them equal opportunities of education and cultural advancement?

The historical persistence of social strategies of male dominance suggests strongly that men have intuitively known all along that women were their equals. If not, then why would such strategies even be necessary in the first place? Male chauvinists have justified these strategies in the name of female inferiority, but if males truly believed females to be incapable by nature of educational attainment, there would be no reason to deny them access to education. Thus, the history of gender relations suggests that some deep form of male insecurity is the root cause of male chauvinism. Let us examine this thesis more closely.

One universal and transcultural fact is that every man was born and in most cases nurtured by his mother (or a female care-giver). Thus, the initial experience of every human life is an experience of total vulnerability and dependence on a woman. The infant knows intuitively that his or her survival depends on the continued good will of the mother figure,

for if she rejects the infant and refuses to care for it, the infant will die. Thus, *the initial configuration of every human life is one in which rejection by the mother figure is tantamount to death or nonexistence.*

Now of course, the female child is just as vulnerable to maternal rejection as the male child, but there is nevertheless a fundamental difference in the maternal relationship between male and female children. This derives from the fact that the female child shares with the mother not only the generic, preexisting humanity, but her sexual differentiation as well. The female child is complicit with the mother, one with the mother, whereas the male child is, to a certain extent, in contrast to the mother.¹⁷

Moreover, this initial difference in the relationship with the mother figure is not the only factor which distinguishes the life experience of males from that of females; there are also significant gender differences in subsequent socialization, in which the male learns that he must be strong and invulnerable, whereas the female more easily sees herself as needful and vulnerable. This gender differential in socialization generally allows women more easily to accept their vulnerabilities and to have more realistic expectations than males about issues of power and control. This greater self-acceptance allows women to deal more constructively with their vulnerabilities — by building appropriate support mechanism through friendships and truly reciprocal relationships. The male, however, will have great difficulty in accepting the fact of his vulnerability and thus of dealing with it in a constructive manner. This denial (or even repudiation) of self-vulnerability tends to make male friendships more competitive and less supportive. It also gives males unrealistic expectations about power and control.

It thus seems clear that every man will have the primal memory of the initial period of his existence when rejection by a woman meant death, and that the impact of this memory will be amplified by the degree to which his socially-induced self-image leads him to resist recognizing any "weaknesses" in himself. In particular, he will consider any need for or dependency on a woman as a sign of extreme weakness, entailing as it does the recognition of his essential vulnerability. Could it not be, then, that the essential male vulnerability, the fundamental male insecurity, is the visceral fear of rejection by a woman?

Of course, the emotionally autonomous, adult male is fully capable of realizing that he is no longer in this position of childlike vulnerability and that he can endure female rejection without being destroyed by it. But then just how many emotionally autonomous adult males do you actually know? Chances are not very many. Moreover, in order to overcome his dread of female rejection, the male must first face squarely the fact that he has it, and this self-knowledge is very damaging to the male ego and hence easily repressed or denied.

It seems likely then, that strategies of male dominance represent the principle of least effort in solving this problem. Men have simply used their one point of superiority — their greater physical strength — to restrict the freedom of females and control their lives *so as to deny them the possibility of rejecting the male.* All of the restrictions and controls on the lives of women were designed to place the woman in a situation where the wife, for example, could not reject her husband, or at least could not do so without extremely grave social consequences. Male chauvinism is a massive defense mechanism against acknowledging a fundamental male vulnerability.

Of course, no exercise of physical power can actually prevent rejection, but it can make the social price of engaging in rejecting behaviour so high that few will dare exhibit it. However, the man also pays a high price for this strategy, because now he is forever uncertain as to whether the loyal behaviour of his wife represents a free choice on her behalf, or only her capitulation to the reality of her social situation.

"Do you really love me?" the husband asks his wife. She replies: "I bear and raise your children, make your meals. keep your house, pick up your clothes, and endure your constant preoccupation with such trivia as professional sports. What other proof do you want?" But what he wants is the one proof he cannot have: that his wife truly had the opportunity to do something else with her life and freely chose, in full knowledge of the consequences, to serve him instead. Deep down, he knows that no rational human being would make such a choice.

Thus, the male fear of and resistance to female independence derives from the deep realization that a truly autonomous female is totally free to reject him and indeed may well do so. In fact, the most chauvinist males are those who seem to have the least tolerance for any degree of female independence. Clearly they interpret such independence as tantamount to rejection itself: if she is free to reject me, then she will inevitably reject me, so he feels. Thus, the instant the wife asserts any degree of independence, it as if she has rejected him already.

Moreover, the very strategies of control and domination that males have deployed to forestall or prevent rejecting behavior on the part of females are totally self-defeating. Indeed, such strategies serve only to sabotage the authentic elements of gender relationships and can actually produce the very result the man so fears. Thus, in their relationships with women, men have a simple and fundamental choice: on the one hand to renounce strategies of power and control and to pursue a reciprocal relationship based on mutual respect and mutual free choice; or, on the other hand, to pursue various control strategies, both gross and subtle, thereby continuing to undermine the basis for a mutually satisfying relationship.

It is also worth noting that the differential history of males and females, although rooted in injustice, has nonetheless developed to a very high degree certain positive capacities in women: an emotional stamina, a capacity for sustained intimacy, and for endurance. By choosing strategies of dominance over strategies of loving cooperation and mutuality, men are depriving themselves of what they can learn from women and thus sabotaging their own well-being and personal development.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has said that man will be free only when woman is free. Man will be free of his fear of rejection only when he clearly sees that woman is free to reject him *but has freely chosen not to do so*. It is only by relinquishing his dependency on strategies of dominance that man can be certain that the woman's love is freely given and in no wise coerced.

We close this article with the following short poem (authored by the present writer) which attempts to give voice to the self-defeating and self-destructive nature of male dominance behavior.

Women Everywhere

These sisters mothers daughters lovers are everywhere
 Surrounding us with softness nurture compassion nuance
 Subtle sensual spiritual space in which we can truly live.

My brothers, why do we violate desecrate suppress
 Destroy torture maim veil mutilate amputate this precious presence?
 Why must we drown its soft wisdom with beastly barking?

Do you not fear that you lose yourself, your very soul?
 Can you not feel the loss as each potent part of you
 Withers atrophies numbs dies, leaves your cold hard shell of
 Ego to its lonely self-imposed exile?

While there is still time---may there still be time! ---
 Let us stop this slaughter of life itself which
 Receives meagre germ of our sex and returns us beauty incarnate.

Notes and References

1. *Women*, Extracts from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1986, p. 11.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1983, p. 65.
3. *Women*, Op. Cit., p. 8.
4. See *Gleanings*, Op. Cit., pp. 153-54.
5. *Women*, Op. Cit., p. 13.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 10.

10. This echoes a sentiment expressed by Bahá'u'lláh in one of his prayers: "Let, then, their violence be confined to their own selves, that the land and they that dwell therein may find peace." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1987, p. 196.)

11. *Ibid.*, p. 12.

12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of the Universal Peace*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1982, p. 75.

13. *Women*, Op. Cit., p. 12.

14. *Promulgation*, Op. Cit., p. 29.

15. See Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, 1986; discussed in *Notices of the American Mathematical Society*, Vol. 36, No. 6 (1989), p. 670.

16. This insight is due to my collaborator, Sara Clarke. For a fuller development of these and other similar ideas, see Clarke and Hatcher, "Spirit and Gender," forthcoming in a collection of essays edited by Michael Penn.

17. Many psychologists have already pointed out that, traditionally, woman is viewed by man as a mystery. The marks of male sexuality are explicit, visible, projected, while the essential marks of female sexuality are recessive, hidden, internal. And they have this incredible power of bringing forth life. Moreover, the female child forges her sense of self through identification with the mother, whereas, the male child's identity is in contrast to the mother (i.e., "not woman").