

# **Understanding the Human Condition: Secular and Spiritual Perspectives**

*Suresh Sahadevan*

## **Abstract**

Our ideas about who we are, our purpose, and what the world is all about, significantly influence our decisions on how we shall live our lives. This paper examines concepts of the human condition and their attendant consequences. These concepts, derived from the secular (materialist) and spiritual (religious) paradigms, are compared and contrasted with each other to see which are able to best offer guidance for happiness for the individual and society. It is argued that contributions from both paradigms are important for human happiness, but it is vital that materialist explorations and pursuits are always founded upon spiritual principles. However, to retain its relevance and reverence in our contemporary era, it is important for religion to confront and address the challenges of distinguishing proper from improper practice of religion as well as working for the betterment of the world by concretely applying its core spiritual concepts to solve the major problems and difficulties of the world.

## **Introduction**

“How shall we live?” – as individuals and as society – is a timeless question that has attracted considerable thought and reflection over millennia. Undoubtedly it is an important question and its answers will have practical consequences for every seeker bent on discovering its solutions. Though it may not be immediately apparent, the responses to this longstanding query will be framed by the answers to a second question: “Who are we?” – what is our nature, what is our condition? It is actually these latter beliefs that will guide the general direction of our

strivings in life and this remains a fact even when we deny, or do not have, any explicit thoughts or convictions on how we should live. In fact some of us may only be passively drifting along the lines of action defined for us by society, but in such instances we would be adhering to our society's overall understanding of human nature and the human condition. In brief, this second question of who we are is an inescapable prelude to knowing how indeed we should be living our lives.

In this paper, an overview of our human condition is provided from secular as well as spiritual models. Though the words secular and spiritual can be understood in several different ways, herein they will reflect essentially the non-religious and religious positions respectively. In sketching the spiritual claims on this topic, reference will be made to the Bahá'í Faith, and it will soon become apparent that these perspectives are largely eternal themes to be found in several great religions – well in keeping with the Bahá'í Faith's central principles of oneness of religions, oneness of God and oneness of mankind. The secular and spiritual perspectives of four aspects of the human condition will be looked at along the categories developed by Stevenson and Haberman<sup>1</sup>: (a) our understanding of human nature, (b) our understanding of the world around us, (c) our diagnosis of the causes of our main problems in life and (d) our prescription of how these problems can be resolved. In this manner the limitations and strengths of the two perspectives will be directly compared and contrasted.

## Secular Perspective

The common feature of the various secular perspectives adumbrated herein is that primarily they are materialist (in the philosophical sense) and scientific in outlook. This scientific materialism is the predominant philosophy characterizing the worldview in many parts of the developed and developing world.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> L. Stevenson and DL. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, p. 9

<sup>2</sup> W. Barret, *Death of the Soul – Philosophical Thought from Descartes to the Computer*, p. 7

## A) Human Nature

Who are we? What are we?

Is human nature to be conceptualised as a product of our biological constitution, of our psychic make-up or a product of our society? The scientific and biological perspective would have it that ultimately, in terms of our functioning at the microscopic level, all of us are reducible to a physico-chemical state. Thus all of our characteristics, including our vital functions (such as breathing, circulation, movement) and our intellectual functions (including consciousness and emotions) are regarded as emergent properties arising from complex organizations of matter that are obeying physico-chemical laws. In fact, the very origins of life on earth are understood on those physico-chemical terms. The code that enables biological properties to arise from physico-chemical foundations resides in the organism's genes and it is by way of this stored information that our genes are considered to hold the key to the secrets of life.

As human beings, we are also regarded to have evolved from "lower" levels of organisms through the processes of genetic variation and natural selection. From a philosophical perspective, Darwin's theory of evolution delivered a fatal blow to teleological concepts of human nature such as man being divinely created and having thus a unique purpose.<sup>3</sup> Coupled with the Copernican Revolution (demonstrating that our earth was not at the centre of the universe), Darwin's theory further deepened man's existential sense of estrangement: despite all the seeming superiority of a consciously developing civilization in relation to everything else around him, brute scientific facts were relentlessly revealing that there was nothing to indicate that the human race held a privileged position on earth or in the universe.

In brief, we are genetically determined organisms, physico-chemically constituted in essence with no evidence showing us to be specially created. Our distinctive features lie in our abilities to make use of our reasoning powers (the philosophy of rationalism) and our experiences, in particular our sense-based experiences (the philosophy of empiricism). Whether our reasoning powers are more important than our sense-based experiences (or the converse) for the build-up of useful knowledge has

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<sup>3</sup> D. Palmer, *Visions of Human Nature: an Introduction*, p. 184-185

been the subject matter of many centuries of debate and is still unresolved.<sup>4</sup> On a pragmatic note, humanity's scientific advancements are often thought to rest on both these abilities. In refreshing contrast to rationalism and empiricism, a contemporary development in philosophy has been the increasing interest shown in the emotional dimension of human nature and the very important role emotions play in not only causing, but also resolving, fundamental human dilemmas.<sup>5, 6</sup>

Apart from the bio-genetic perspective, the discipline of psychology views human nature to be significantly influenced by emotional experiences (especially during childhood) and it also teaches that many emotional conflicts remain within the subconscious realm of man and man is often unaware of his true self or true motivations. Another quasi-psychological model of human nature is that employed in mainstream economic theories. The archetypical economic man is always expected to rationally maximize his utility, where utility is defined in terms of satisfaction of deeply ingrained (and thus essentially unalterable) self-interests. In recent times, economists themselves have increasingly questioned the assumptions underlying such conceptions of man.<sup>7</sup>

Another viewpoint of human nature is defined in terms of the mutual relationship between the individual and society. A communitarian perspective sees the essence of human beings as being fundamentally social in nature, highlighting not only the interdependence of human beings but also how the highest fulfilment of that nature resides in leading virtuous relationships with one another. A version of this perspective is also seen in Marxism, which in fact denies the independent existence of an entity such as human nature: rather, the essence of human beings resides in their relationships with each other and what influences these relationships are the economic modes of production practised by societies.

In a communitarian reading of the human condition, the needs of society or others can be deemed to have priority over the needs of self (society before self). This viewpoint, historically articulated in largely secular

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<sup>4</sup> R. Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature – An Historical Introduction*, p. 79-108

<sup>5</sup> R. de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions*, p. 1-20

<sup>6</sup> M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought – the Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 1-16

<sup>7</sup> A. Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, p 1-28

tones by Aristotle,<sup>8</sup> has been virtually replaced in modern times by a much more individualized conception of the self, where fulfilment is defined in terms of goals and aspiration that the individual sets for himself; in this self-before-society perspective, society becomes a mere aggregation of numerous individual selves who often have competing interests and independent rights.

Finally, the very existence of human nature is increasingly questioned these days with the post-modernist assault on epistemological pursuits. Their emphasis on the relativity and context of all knowledge leads to marked difficulties in defining or describing any form of universal human nature.

*What is our purpose? What are our values?*

Many have written about a feeling of cosmic alienation in relation to the above scientific and materialistic perspectives of man. That sense of alienation also makes us aware of another dimension of the human condition, the unstoppable quest man intrinsically has to discover the meaning of his existence.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of the reality of this need, secular philosophy is nevertheless, committed to the positivist demand to confine itself to verifiable facts and not fall into the so-called naturalistic fallacy – the deriving of an “ought” from an “is”.

However, since strict avoidance of the naturalistic fallacy is impossible (in terms of the need to practically lead our lives), restricted purposes and values have entered into secularism, but with the understanding that these norms and guidelines are intuitively derived and logically coherent with the secular (materially-based) perspectives of human nature. Thus the standard appreciation of the purpose of human life is that of happiness: one lives in order to be happy and the standard bases of that earthly-based happiness have remained remarkably constant over the centuries from as early as Aristotle’s observations on humanity’s common yearnings: physical pleasure, wealth and social approval or fame.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> J. Lear, *Aristotle – the Desire to Understand*, pp. 152 – 208.

<sup>9</sup> L. Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, pp. 29-35

<sup>10</sup> G.J. Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics*, p. 24

An important pre-requisite for the individual's pursuit of these aims towards his or her happiness is that of freedom (and the related concept of rights): the individual must have among other liberties, the freedom of choice in deciding the direction and manner of that pursuit (within, of course, the legal limits of society). Thus, in terms of how society should be structured and function so as to promote the well-being of its citizens, the ideals of freedom and the rights of every citizen have come to be deeply cherished. Also highly valued at this level is the concept of equality, in particular the equality of opportunities for each one to pursue his chosen pathway to happiness.

It is recognized that there is an inescapable element of self-centredness in the above way of defining life's purpose and this self-centredness often collides with the needs of the wider social group. The modern outlook, however, does not look at such self-centredness as being bad per se – in fact, as human beings we cannot but be selfish, given our evolutionary experiences of jungle laws and survival of the fittest. What is needed therefore, to additionally meet the needs of society, is to rationally tutor the crude form of self-centredness to a more enlightened form that recognizes the longer-term benefits (to oneself, of course) of everyone striving to uphold ethical codes of behaviour.

This leads then to an extremely high premium paid by modern man for the instrumental use of reason. Thus at the level of the individual, reason will guide the individual in determining his specific means towards achieving happiness, while considering also the needs of others. At the level of society, reason, via the natural sciences, enables continuous material progress and through the social sciences, brings about ever improving developments in fields such as economics, politics and law; the ends and means of social development can be supported by unaided reason alone.<sup>11</sup> It can likewise develop ethical codes on a purely rational basis, avoiding in this manner, all the historical problems arising from religion (the past source of humanity's ethical laws). In brief, this faith in the benefits of unaided reason towards man's happiness at both the individual and social level, reflects a humanistic ideal that mankind has set for itself, especially from the times of the Enlightenment in Europe.

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<sup>11</sup> A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 32-53



As to the significance of death and what comes thereafter, the materialistic perspective is stoically, but coherently, silent. There is no objective, scientific knowledge that gives answers in this area and man must accept the brute fact that this strange and estranged life is all that we have, to best achieve the materially-defined goal of happiness (pleasure, wealth and fame).

The Marxists, existentialists and post modernists hold onto different answers to questions about life's purposes and values. The Marxists (and other Communists) will point out that the above conception of man's self-centredness is artificial, an induced, secondary reality arising from the crowded and manipulated environment designed by inordinately wealthy capitalists. For Marx too, the aim in life is happiness but a happiness that arises from mutual cooperation and a caring social environment which human beings are naturally capable of creating. The secular existentialists, on the other hand, totally deny that human beings can ever be happy. They see no roads to salvation (material or metaphysical) and recommend that we must first recognize the fundamental and universal truth of anguish that is at the core of our existence. For the post-modernists, there are no all-embracing foundational truths that can encompass the diverse cultures and mindsets constitutive of the human race. They decry the illusion of universality in any recommendations for the norms of living; truth, for the post-modernist, is not absolute, but always relative, in the contexts of both space and time.<sup>12</sup>

#### B) The World Around Us

One common theme amongst all the materialist perspectives of the human condition is the true and unquestioned reality of the world and universe around us. This world is physically real as we ourselves are and there are no other realities to talk of. Scientists believe that the universe originated from a gigantic explosion leading to a phase of expansion, and which, in time to come, will revert, concluding eventually to total collapse in itself. Further fundamental questions regarding the origin of this origin have no answers (at least presently) and from a pragmatic point of view such questions are regarded as unimportant for individual human beings, whose basic objective is to be engaged with this real world and its people in an

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<sup>12</sup> Z. Bauman, *Post-modern Ethics*, p.12

instrumental manner so as to bring about one's own materially-based happiness during his or her life span.

### C) Diagnosis Of Our Maladies

The materialist man fundamentally seeks pleasure, wealth and recognition so as to attain happiness – the logical end-point or purpose of a purely earth-bound existence. To realize them, he or she also wants or needs the essential and relevant freedoms and equality of opportunities. Of course, if social questions arise, he or she may also say that such a realization of goals should preferably take place in a caring and loving society. Many obstacles however stand in the way towards the attainment of happiness conceptualised in this manner and it will be instructive to list them in this section.

#### Individual level

To begin with, there is the question of means (for achieving happiness) and, in particular, the unequal distribution of these means in society. Even when freedom of opportunities can be guaranteed constitutionally, the *antecedent* inequalities that Sen talks of, either in external circumstances (such as inherited fortunes or the social environment that we are born into) and/or personal characteristics (such as health status, physical and mental abilities) cannot thus assure that the final happiness will be equally achieved by all.<sup>13</sup> Even when there is antecedent equality (with the full understanding that such an assumption is unrealistic), two individuals from a similar background still will not have equal chances of attaining happiness, given also the *on-going* dissimilarity of external factors that can interfere with each of their pursuits. Furthermore, even when happiness is finally attained, there is still no subsequent assurance that all the combination of variables responsible for the success will remain the same thereafter so as to maintain that happiness. Even if (most improbably) one has the ability to significantly control and keep constant those external variables, one's internal variables will still alter (changing health, ageing etc). Happiness, in other words, is totally elusive and it is intrinsic to life that the contingencies of changes and chances are always operational and they can directly frustrate man's desire for pleasure, wealth or recognition.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined*, pp.1-11



The materialist perspective will also acknowledge that the inability to talk of any matter after death renders a serious absurdity to whatever imperfect struggles individuals have to experience as they live out their lives.<sup>14</sup> This meaninglessness is compounded many times over when the striving towards happiness is further thwarted by such factors as described above. Scientific materialism has no answers to this fundamental ontological meaninglessness, which existentialism also focuses upon. Existential philosophy additionally states that it is our unwillingness to appreciate the stark reality that we can never ever be happy (by finding a meaning external to ourselves) and our inability to cope with the radical freedom of choice and action that have been thrust upon us (consequent to the eclipse of God in our civilization) which contribute to modern man's malady.

Beyond this existential *angst*, the discipline of psychology focuses upon the emotional conflicts which all of us, to varying degrees, experience as a result of our growing up and living with others; moreover, often enough these conflicts are operating at the subconscious level creating distortions of perception, as well as repressions. As the saying goes, "even in his own house, man is not the master".

The post-modernists analyse the human dilemma to be stemming from mistaken modernist pretensions about the universability and foundational nature of rationality; they see the lack of context-sensitivity in the understanding and application of logically derived conclusions (especially in the realm of values) to be the source of divisiveness and unhappiness for mankind.

### Societal level

Another inescapable fact of human life is that it is fundamentally social in nature: that is, man characteristically lives in groups and this creates certain tensions between the needs of the individual vis-à-vis the needs of the group. Psychologically, man wants to be a member of a loving community, but it soon becomes clear that for the creation of such a loving community, individuals must be ready to forgo certain manners of pursuit, and thus attainment, of happiness. In other words, individuals will have to sacrifice some of their wishes and interests for the sake of unity in the community they are living in. Some philosophers consider this

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<sup>14</sup> E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 268-269

dilemma between the individuals' needs and society's needs to be an *aporia* – a conflict that cannot be resolved.<sup>15</sup> The primary reason is that all secular attempts to develop an ethics of caring run into the difficulties of moral relativity as well as result in the weak type of ethical commitments that Sen has described.<sup>16</sup>

From another viewpoint, the basic social problem can be described to be that of disunity stemming from two contemporary realities that none of us can run away from: the desire for autonomy and the existence of social plurality.<sup>17</sup> These realities thwart communitarian aspirations towards shared understanding of the common good to be effected by social institutions. Liberal individualism has deep distrust of all attempts to work out communal standards. Authority, within such a perspective, is likened to authoritarianism, and in rejecting authority, moral education is undermined.<sup>18</sup> This leads to, for individuals, more perplexing and difficult choices about lifestyles and, for societies, an associated, deep-rooted divisiveness and instability.

For Marxists, the fundamental cause of man's malady lies in the distorted relationship between man and man, arising from the capitalist mode of economic production. This brand of economic lifestyle which all of us in capitalist societies are exposed to and thus inevitably imbibe, enforces upon us a vision wherein we are encouraged to see our fellow human beings as a means for our own materialistic gain. The starting point for Marxists is for us to acknowledge this impoverished and unfortunate position that we are all in, and then to overthrow the capitalist regime and replace it with a communist mode of economic production. While Marxism has now been largely discredited, it is openly recognized that the free market economic model has many serious limitations (including widening income inequalities, inability to control the "externalities" of economic pursuits such as environmental damage or the "corrosion of character")<sup>19, 20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Z. Bauman, *Post-modern ethics*, p.12

<sup>16</sup> A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 270

<sup>17</sup> W. Kymlicka, *Community*, In: *A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p.376

<sup>18</sup> E. Kennedy, *Introduction*, In: *Simon YR. Freedom and Community*, p. xii-xv.

<sup>19</sup> R. Heilbroner, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Capitalism*, pp. 109-117

### Spiritual Maladies

While the scientific materialistic perspective recognizes some of the above limitations of its admittedly diverse understanding of, and approach towards, human happiness, it is also keen to point out the limitations of its primary contender – religion. The main problem with religion is its non-verifiability scientifically and the inability of its various doctrines to stand up to the rigors of rationality. Since reason is traditionally considered to play no role in matters of faith and because faith rests so heavily on emotions, the danger of fanaticism can, and have, easily occurred with countless destruction and persecutions committed in the name of God. Furthermore, religion has been markedly oppressive, with its institutions giving no freedom for individual believers to interpret scripture or choose their lifestyles. In fact, one reason why many people are so much freer today is due to the decline of religion - freedom not just in the domain of physical liberties but also in the intellectual realm where man is not constrained to question or imagine. Thus one fundamental basis for justifying the secular approach to understanding the human condition stems from the need to avoid the dangers of the religious alternative.

#### D) Prescription For Our Maladies

The materialist prescription for happiness is always a partial one (though this often goes unrecognised or is insufficiently acknowledged). The incompleteness of the prescription is related mainly to the brute fact that man can never fully control all the contingencies in life, including its absurdities and terrors.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the popular belief is that man is rationally capable of deriving the ultimate solutions to his or her dilemmas and difficulties and what is vitally needed is more and more objective knowledge in all areas of our lives. In that spirit therefore, the successes of science hold a great promise for humanity because scientific discoveries enable man to have a real and rational control over many significant aspects of his external environment. Antecedent inequalities and on-going fluxes in external circumstances which obtrude and frustrate man's pursuit of happiness (as mentioned above) can be better attenuated, enabling even more people to successfully attain their chosen goals of

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<sup>20</sup> R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character – the Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, pp. 136-148

<sup>21</sup> E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 283-284.

happiness. In brief, scientific breakthroughs provide the solutions to our problems and they also empower more individuals to attain higher levels of independence and capabilities.

This belief is not only based on the natural and biological sciences helping in various physical ways (such as health, reduction of toil, quality of shelter, communication and transportation) but also on evolving knowledge in the social sciences. These latter fields (such as economics, political science, and sociology) have, as examples, developed more reliable strategies for economic development, promoted the democratic ideals of governance, defined and upheld human rights and operationalised the practice of procedural and distributive elements of social justice. In all these matters of progress, the belief is the same: that through the use of reason and the empirical, scientific method, it will be possible for us to work out technical solutions for achieving happiness.

This conviction (and some would use the term, faith) also extends to the domain of ethics. It is well recognized that the moral realm has to often accompany the above-mentioned technical solutions so that the latter can be appropriately implemented. Discarding religion, however, there has always been the conviction that man's rational faculty alone will be able to derive the fundamental principles of ethics, which will indicate the necessary steps that man has to take in his various dealings with fellow human beings. Utilitarianism and deontological ethics are often-quoted examples of such secular ethical systems - even if some of their founding fathers (John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant) themselves were theists.<sup>22</sup> Another secular endeavour to advance the ethical realm is through the study and critical discussion of the humanities.<sup>23, 24</sup> Still others believe that a minimal set of universal behavioural norms can quite simply be derived through the use of reason.<sup>25</sup> What can also be noted in all these secular approaches is that the primary benefit of ethics is seen to be operating at the level of society. The benefit of virtues at the level of individuals is only indirect, in that a more united society - the product of ethical behaviour - will also be conducive to more successful strivings for

<sup>22</sup> AF. Holmes, *Fact, Value and God*, pp. 118-130 and 144-159

<sup>23</sup> M. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice - the Literary Imagination and Public Life*, pp. 1-12

<sup>24</sup> WC. Booth, *The Company We Keep - An Ethics of Fiction*, pp. 483-489

<sup>25</sup> S. Bok, *Common Values*, pp. 13-19

happiness for its members. In other words, virtuous behaviour is valued instrumentally rather than intrinsically.

Marxists believe, however, that the solution is in the change of socio-economic practices and not just in the advancement of science and technology. Specifically, the capitalist mode of economic practice has to be discarded and socialism, followed eventually by communism, be put in place, before the benefits of science can truly be experienced by all humanity. However, with the near demise of Communism in our present era, many economists are convinced that market economy will play a pivotal role in advancing the material prosperity of humanity, albeit moderated by the need for more governmental regulations and interventions.<sup>26, 27, 28</sup>

Psychologists emphasise the importance of self-awareness as well as psychotherapeutic methods of self-integration so as to empower individuals towards growth. Though the process can be painful at times, this path eventually leads to a happier life. Existentialists in turn claim that the true path to authenticity (and happiness) resides in the correct understanding and practice of freedom, even if the specifics of that understanding and practice are often not spelled out. Post-modernists point towards the importance always of being mindful of the role of context (such as that of history or culture) and the moving away from universalistic or foundational types of prejudiced thinking.

It can be seen from the above that scientific materialism does harbour optimistic viewpoints about the perfectibility of both human nature as well as the human condition through its distinctive methods of observation and verification. The nature of that perfectibility varies in accordance with the specific doctrine that one is espousing. Thus from the perspective of biology being the root determinant of human nature, perfectibility essentially resides in the methods of genetic engineering. From the psychological point of view, perfectibility comes about via psychotherapy and self-integration. For those who believe that forces of society essentially mould human nature, perfectibility of the human

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<sup>26</sup> A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 127-129

<sup>27</sup> R. Heilbroner, *21<sup>st</sup> Century Capitalism*, pp 134-142

<sup>28</sup> JK. Galbraith, *The Good Society - the Humane Agenda*, pp. 75-81

condition can only be brought about by improvements in the structures and functions of social institutions. Needless to say, many of these perfectibility-related approaches are not mutually exclusive and are thus pursued concurrently.

For those who are aware, nevertheless, of the current inadequacies and incompleteness of the scientific promise for the attainment of happiness, the only logical conclusion is that these limitations reflect the need to have even more objective knowledge, more technical discoveries and possibly also, methodological breakthroughs. Thus, as more scientists are becoming increasingly critical of the reductionist approach of science that potentially lends itself to narrowed and even prejudiced perspectives (clearly illustrated in the current day example of genetic determinism)<sup>29,30</sup>, proposals are being made for attitudinal and philosophical shifts that can produce more useful information.<sup>31</sup>

### Spiritual Perspective

One fundamental feature of the spiritual perspective is its emphasis that the true, ultimate reality of existence does not reside in this earthly sphere but is instead located elsewhere – beyond the reach of our senses and our intellect. What also needs to be appreciated at the outset about this perspective are two other characteristics: firstly, that it differs from the philosophy of idealism because the spiritual vision does not deny the reality of this earthly life (the way idealism denies it) but only says that the *ultimate* reality is in another dimension; and secondly, the closely related point (given the acceptance of earthly reality) that the spiritual perspective always demands a commitment to continually improve humanity's existence in a spirit of service through scientific advances and moral excellence. In essence, what religion wants is for man to be in love with God and yet to remain engaged with this world so as to promote its unity through individual efforts of compassion and collective efforts of science and justice. This worldview is much more nuanced and

<sup>29</sup> R.C. Lewontin, *The Doctrine of DNA – Biology as Ideology*, pp. 19-37

<sup>30</sup> E.F. Keller, *The Century of the Gene*, pp. 5-8

<sup>31</sup> R. C. Lewontin, *The Triple Helix – Gene, Organism and Environment*, pp. 109-129



multifaceted than is often described and a concise summary is attempted below, along the same categories as given for the secular perspective.

However, before describing further the religious perspective, a preliminary question needs answering and that is, how does one establish or know the truth of religion. For present purposes, only a brief answer to this vital question is possible (a lengthier explanation, in the context of humanity's moral endeavours, has been given elsewhere).<sup>32</sup> Essentially the Bahá'í Writings claim that direct apprehension of God is impossible for us as human beings, and that the only recourse we have in knowing the truth of religion is by knowing the truth of the Prophet or the Messenger of God. This route, (which requires both faith as well as rationality) is far more accessible to us since the Prophet was, at a certain time in history, living amongst humanity. The seeker is encouraged to get to know the life history of the Prophet and to peruse, without any bias, the revealed Word of God uttered by the Prophet. A promise made by religion is that if such a search is sincerely done, the seeker will be able to arrive at a conclusion about the truth of the Messenger and thus, the truth of God.

The subsequent description of the spiritual perspective assumes an acceptance of its central validity. In the discussion below of the religious paradigm, the specific concepts are all from the Bahá'í Faith, and while the particularities of these concepts may appear to differ from some of the other major religions, it is assumed, in the manner of Ward,<sup>33</sup> that at a general enough level of analysis, what various religions say about the human condition can be deemed to be similar. This position is also in keeping with one of the Bahá'í Faith's central principles, that in essence, all religions are one.

#### A) Human Nature

##### Who are we? What are we?

The Bahá'í Writings refer to three degrees of reality with reference to humanity.<sup>34</sup> There is firstly the realm of the body – this is the physical or material realm incorporating the faculties of the senses and which man shares with animals. Unlike animals however, man also possesses a soul,

<sup>32</sup> S. Sahadevan, "The Missing Moral Dimension", *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Vol. 4, 1999, pp. 33-54.

<sup>33</sup> K. Ward, *Religion and Human Nature*, p.324.

<sup>34</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 96-99

the second reality of man and his truly defining characteristic. The soul is regarded as a sign of God and its essence a mystery that none can comprehend. Finally, there is the realm of the energizing Spirit which is regarded as emanating from the Kingdom of God and which becomes man's reality when his soul turns towards God.

Who we truly are in actuality (that is, in contrast to our potentiality) depends on how our souls are orientated.<sup>35</sup> If our souls are orientated away from God and towards the bodily realm, then the material qualities in the soul will gain ascendancy and our lives will be largely defined in, and limited to, the offerings of the senses and the material world. This materialist orientation is regarded as a limitation in that in so far as the soul's true state of happiness is concerned, it is the spiritual connection with God that the soul actually needs.<sup>36</sup> Thus when our souls are freely and lovingly (and these conditionals are vital) turned towards God and the realm of the spirit, the soul begins to experience the love of God and thus develop and strengthen its spiritual qualities, manifesting features such as selflessness, compassion and radiance in its interactions with the material world. The basis and manner of the soul's turning towards God are discussed further below.

While the Bahá'í Writings do not equate man's soul with God, the signs of God are described to be potentially residing within man's soul, just as they also are residing within the world.<sup>37</sup> The soul, while it has a beginning (at conception) is regarded as having no end and it is this immortality of the soul that enables the religious paradigm to talk of how "life" continues after death. The dimensions and nature of the post-earthly existence are unknown, but its central feature is that of the soul's ever-continuing growth and approach towards God.<sup>38</sup> In this context, heaven and hell are not to be understood as fixed locations for permanent residence, but rather as metaphors referring to the state of the soul – when turned toward God and experiencing His bliss, that soul is experiencing heaven (and this can occur even in our present life); conversely, when the soul is turned away from God and experiencing the passions of the self,

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.185

<sup>37</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.178

<sup>38</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.66

that underlying (even if unrecognized) agitation, disquiet and remoteness is referred to as hell.<sup>39</sup>

The presence of the soul and its afore-mentioned characteristics were an established and well-accepted part of the worldview in various civilisations of the past but from around the period of Enlightenment, many modernising, westernised societies witnessed the gradual but sure “death of the soul”.<sup>40</sup> By itself, the spiritual perspective on human nature does not contradict many of the scientific discoveries relating to man, however, it would reject theories such as those of genetic determinism and the origin of humanity from primates. The human species, while it has passed from “condition to condition, from form to form, from one shape to another”, is deemed to always have been, from the beginning, distinct from the animals<sup>41</sup> and its distinctiveness and defining potential resides in its rational soul<sup>42</sup> and not its genes.

The most important power of the soul is its rationality; unlike Hume, religion views man’s reason to be potentially superior to his passions. Reason therefore empowers man not only towards scientific discoveries but contributes towards wisdom in the moral and spiritual realm. Human emotions are recognized to be important and the cultivation of positive emotions (such as compassion) and avoidance of negative emotions (such as anger, envy, lust) are stressed. Man’s nature is always perfectible and the positive transformation of his inner, psychological make-up resides in the master emotion of the love of God, a love that re-orders as well as inspires man to make the necessary sacrifices to spiritually grow.<sup>43</sup> Without the knowledge and love of God, all forms of psychotherapy will only possess sub-optimal effectiveness to bring about personal integration and growth. The capacities of the soul to reflect the attributes of God are infinite, and these capacities are always growing; the soul’s traits are thus never fixed but always progressive with the love of God.

While religion recognizes the reality of social forces on human beings, it ultimately views individuals to be prior to society – the individual always

<sup>39</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 189, 118

<sup>40</sup> W. Barret, *Death of The Soul*, pp. 3-10

<sup>41</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 183-184

<sup>42</sup> *ibid*, p.208

<sup>43</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.452

has the potential capacity to decide for himself and herself how his or her life should be lived no matter what the sociological demands or constraints are. Thus the structures and functioning of social institutions are not seen to be the determining factors behind the individual's choices and preferences; the potential for man, at any time, to be free of such influences – through an inspiration borne of the love of God – is always emphasized by religion. That which is ultimately deterministic for the individual is the nature of his or her freely chosen relationship with God.

*What is our purpose? What are our values?*

Unlike the secular paradigm, which is largely silent on this subject matter because of its positivist commitments and fears of naturalistic fallacies, the spiritual perspective makes several important claims here. Our purpose in life is to know God and love God<sup>44</sup> and this also translates to attainment of virtues<sup>45</sup> and acquisition of a saintly character.<sup>46</sup> The fulfilment of this purpose is by way of sincere service towards others and working for the betterment of the world<sup>47</sup> as well by promoting unity and concord amongst people.<sup>48</sup> While happiness is acknowledged as an important objective in life, it is spiritual happiness (in contrast to material happiness) that receives focus and which is realized through the fulfilment of our God-assigned purposes. Thus, from the spiritual viewpoint, virtues, in addition to their instrumental benefits to society, have also an intrinsic value for individuals, in terms of their impact on the souls' growth and development. In this teleological conception of mankind, Aristotle's virtue ethics is very similar to the religious perspective. In fact, Aristotle had also emphasized the connection between man's intrinsically valued virtues and his contemplation and service to God,<sup>49</sup> but it is a connection that is insufficiently and infrequently acknowledged in many of the modern secular descriptions of Aristotelian ethics.

The above manner of specifying spiritual happiness in terms of service and selflessness resolves the conflict or *aporía* that exists in the secular paradigm between the individual's wants and the needs of society. The

<sup>44</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.65

<sup>45</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.4

<sup>46</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.299

<sup>47</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 184

<sup>48</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.235.

<sup>49</sup> A. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, pp. 86-112.

way the spiritual individual is orientated, in terms of his or her life's purpose and values, is such that the needs of society are also the needs of the individual. The individual's *raison d'être* is the service that he or she can offer to others in society. In the secular world the social sciences are still looking for a theory that can resolve the *aporia* mentioned above, since secular perspectives deem self-centredness to be rational, and hence cannot inspire the lasting and consistent practice of sacrifice, a trait long recognized to be vital for the continued well-being of society.<sup>50</sup> In this context, the spiritual paradigm would disagree with the conventional economic picture of man as a rational (meaning self-centred) maximiser of utility or preferences. Religion will not equate rationality with self-centredness and conversely, it does not at all see selflessness as an irrational trait. Such diametrically opposed conceptions, between the secular and the spiritual, of what it means to be rational, arise in part because the secular vision of happiness is totally restricted to man's physical lifespan, whereas the spiritual vision of happiness is not time-bound.

The highest value cherished in the religious perspective is the love of God,<sup>51</sup> inspired by the knowledge and beauty of God, and which enables a powerful multi-levelled vision of oneness – oneness of God, oneness of religions and oneness of mankind. At the individual level, love of God is valued for its transformative power, while at the societal level, it is regarded as the greatest power that can embrace the essential diversity in humanity – be it in opinions, thoughts, intelligence or sentiments – by not allowing these differences to become divisive.<sup>52</sup> In essence, love of God – *in its proper form* as a mature and discerning state of emotion – promotes unity in diversity and becomes religion's answer to the dilemmas of moral relativity seen in our highly (some would say, overly) intellectual post-modern era. Like all love, this love of God must come from within us freely, and in that spirit of freedom, we must – as a vital constituent of that love – trust God and submit to Him and His Will, always recognizing that “He doeth whatsoever He willeth”.<sup>53</sup> It is in this sense that man's freedom and its seeming opposite, submission, are extremely important concepts in religion. In submitting to God, man also experiences humility,

<sup>50</sup> R. Trigg, *Understanding Social Science*, pp. 132-154.

<sup>51</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 261.

<sup>52</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 301, 305

<sup>53</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.51

a vital trait for engendering love and unity in society. In the spirit of our love of God, we are to be compassionate toward others and to overlook their faults for the sake of God (*not* for the sake of others).<sup>54, 55</sup> Also, it is through the love of God that the believer derives the needed sustenance to be positively engaged with the world, and promote its unity in a spirit of service to others. In essence, we observe all the commandments of God for the love of His beauty.<sup>56</sup>

Just as love of God inspires man to be committed to this world and to work towards its betterment, it also asks man, in another seeming paradox, to be detached from all earthly influences except Him.<sup>57</sup> This means not to be attached or dependent on anyone or anything. The list under "anything" is diverse, including physical pleasure, wealth, power and social recognition (in all its gross and more subtle forms) as well as the rewards of heaven.<sup>58</sup> Detachment is not an easy concept to comprehend or put into practice, especially when it is juxtaposed with the other spiritual injunction to be engaged lovingly with the world. In fact, only when religion's call for detachment is founded upon the individual's proper love of God, can such a lifestyle remain psychologically sound and not lead to unhealthy states of aloofness. The logical paradox of being committed to the world as well as being detached from it melts away in practice when virtuous deeds are being performed with no expectations or thoughts of rewards or recognition. The deed itself becomes its own reward, inspired by the love of God<sup>59</sup>, reflecting thus religion's wish to see purity of motive and sincerity of will to be driving all actions.

Rationality, freedom and equality are all highly valued in the spiritual paradigm, but the Bahá'í Writings would clarify that their value is secondary to, and to be derived from, the love of God and the attendant spiritual perception of oneness. Thus while the rational faculty of the soul is considered to be its highest power, the contributions of this faculty become most useful when, to begin with, it is inspired by the love of God to be of service to mankind. A related point is that spiritually defined

<sup>54</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.93

<sup>55</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 315

<sup>56</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 332

<sup>57</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 328

<sup>58</sup> A. Taherzadeh, *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.20

<sup>59</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.189



purposes and values are not antagonistic towards scientific values in pursuing truth. In fact acquisition of scientific (and artistic) knowledge is strongly encouraged so that the well-being of mankind can be promoted. Pursuit of truth by the scientific mode and the religious mode is deemed complementary and both branches of knowledge are needed for harmonious living.<sup>60</sup> There is thus no naturalistic fallacy to talk of, because the "ought" was never, in the first place, meant to be derived from the "is" – both are vital and religion is the source of all "oughts" and needed values.

The highest ideal religion envisions for society is its unity, a unity founded upon the spiritual recognition of the oneness of mankind, a recognition that requires for its sustenance, the love of God. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh states, "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless its unity is firmly established."<sup>61</sup> In our era, this unity is to be fully appreciated at a global level (and not just nationally), taking care at the same time to preserve its rich, valid diversity.<sup>62</sup> The highest social virtue is identified to be justice and its purpose is to promote the unity of mankind.<sup>63, 64</sup> In this context, society must also enshrine freedom for its citizens; however, in the vocabulary of Rawls' well-accepted theory of justice (as quoted by Wolff<sup>65</sup>), the principle of the oneness of mankind (founded upon the love of God), within the religious approach, has lexical priority over the principle of liberty. Only when such spiritually understood values of oneness and justice are subsequently brought onto policy areas such as socio-economic development, education and environmental stewardship, can true and lasting collective progress be experienced by humanity.<sup>66, 67</sup>

Equality is another deeply cherished social value but as Sen has pointed out, striving for equality in one space or variable will necessarily have to lead to inequality in other spaces.<sup>68</sup> Likewise, the Bahá'í Writings agree

<sup>60</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 141-146

<sup>61</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.286

<sup>62</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp.290-292

<sup>63</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.67

<sup>64</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp.28-30, 32

<sup>65</sup> J. Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, pp.174-175

<sup>66</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp.42-44

<sup>67</sup> Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, pp.14-24

<sup>68</sup> A. Sen, *Inequality Re-examined*, pp.18-19

that complete inequality is impracticable and indeed a chimera; in fact inequality in degree and capacity is an intrinsic property of nature and necessarily, there will be rich as well as poor people.<sup>69</sup> The central principle governing this matter is not one of equality but instead, the spiritual oneness of mankind, a oneness characterized by our creation from the one same God and by our common spiritual capacities to care for one another unitedly.<sup>70</sup> With this understanding of oneness, borne from the love of God, the rich themselves will *voluntarily* share their wealth and participate in social and economic readjustments so that extremes of wealth and poverty are eliminated.<sup>71</sup>

### B) The World Around Us

As mentioned above, the religious perspective does not deny the reality of the world we live in, even while it emphasizes that the Ultimate Reality for all of us is elsewhere. Religion, unlike the fears of many who have advanced psychosocial explanations for the origin of religion,<sup>72</sup> is fully and squarely aware of the real problems of the world and, in fact, demands that the problems be faced and resolved by all, without prejudice and illusion. In other words, the spiritual perspective requires a commitment to improving the conditions of this world (even when for each believer the earthly existence is only a transitory one), and states that to take on this task, one must have both spiritual and scientific knowledge.<sup>73, 74</sup> Our spiritual growth in this earthly existence comes about not by busying ourselves in our own concerns, but through rehabilitating the fortunes of mankind.<sup>75</sup>

### C) Diagnosis of Our Maladies

#### Individual level

The religious paradigm roots out the chief cause of man's anguish and unhappiness of his turning away from God and not experiencing the love of God. In such a state man is left without an inner compass, making it

<sup>69</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 151-152

<sup>70</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words (Arabic)*, No. 68, p. 28

<sup>71</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 30

<sup>72</sup> J. Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories*, pp. 126-201

<sup>73</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 62-64

<sup>74</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.51

<sup>75</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 86

difficult for him to define a self-transcendent purpose in his life; religion points to a rather simple psychological truth that self-confined and self-centred life purposes cannot evince long-lasting meaning to the individual. Moreover, man is always plagued by the approach of death, and the subsequent void after that. He is continually aware that whatever happiness he has, is always in a precarious state of existence – at any time, major fluxes (internal or external) can arise, wiping out all that he had worked for, or been fortunate to have. He can only hope that he will not be the unlucky one. He lacks the overall picture which religion provides – a picture depicting purpose and meaning in both this earthly existence and beyond – that inspires a more assured and accepting response towards the changes and chances of life, including aloneness and death. Without the spiritual paradigm, he needs immense courage – which, in its healthy form, is rare – and the overwhelming majority of people escape by either not thinking of these existential matters or distract themselves continually through innumerable avenues that they and their societies create.

Religion recognizes the importance of acquiring wealth – as long as that wealth does not become an end in itself and man does not become attached to it, but uses it also for the welfare of society.<sup>76,77</sup> Religion decries the folly of pursuing fame, power and pleasure, as these endpoints are transitory, pertaining only to this earthly existence and moreover, inimical to the capabilities that are truly needed in the bigger picture of growing towards God, by way of selflessness and service.<sup>78</sup> Earthly pursuits and attachments inevitably lead to a self-centred lifestyle that does not bring true peace to the soul and constricts its vision and potential.

Religion's responses to the insights of psychology, existentialism and post-modernism regarding mankind's malaise are mixed. Thus, while it may have no objections to psychology's claims that man has many inner conflicts and tensions that he is unaware of or does not want to be aware of, that he gets by with games of self-deception and illusions, religion may want to add that even when man takes the painful first steps of knowing himself, those steps must be thorough enough so as to lead him

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<sup>76</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 276

<sup>77</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp.24-25

<sup>78</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 138-139

to the knowledge of God. In fact, the spiritual model does regard the true knowledge of self to be akin to knowledge of God.<sup>79</sup> Likewise the religious perspective may have no objections with the existentialist's observation of how man is in anguish because he does not know how to make use of his radical freedom. However, religion will state that absolute freedom was not meant for man, but rather, man was given freedom so that he can freely submit himself, with love, to God. Paradoxical as it may seem (and there are many "paradoxes" in religion), it is in this submission to God that man begins to experience the truest form of liberty.<sup>80</sup>

While religion will agree with the important avoidance of prejudices that post-modernism often alludes to (in their emphasis on retaining historical or cultural context in all claims of knowledge), as well as with the relativity of all truth (such as scientific truth and the social dimension of religious truth) in that these verities are always progressively being revealed, nevertheless, for the period associated with each revelation, religion would regard its truths to be both universalistic and foundational (concepts that post-modernism is antagonistic towards). In fact, the spiritual laws of religion (as opposed to its social laws) are deemed to be additionally valid across all time (past and future).<sup>81</sup> In this sense, in terms of the core spiritual injunctions, religion would be opposed to any suggestions of moral relativity. As mentioned above, its answer to humanity's need for a dominating sentiment that can still unify a widely diverse mankind is the love of God that "brings the different people under the shadow of the tent of affection".<sup>82</sup> Love of God is of fundamental relevance to all mankind, at all times.<sup>83</sup>

### Societal level

While it is recognized that the positivist attitude in science is presently not as prominent as before, there is still a general inclination in many developed parts of the world to focus upon and believe only that which is empirically verifiable and that which is quantifiable. The development and inculcation of many socio-economic policies arise from such convictions. Spiritual faith is regarded to be a very poor source of sound

<sup>79</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp.178, 326

<sup>80</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp.335-336

<sup>81</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp 364-366

<sup>82</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.301

<sup>83</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp.82-83

knowledge. Religion would view this ubiquitous social fascination with the scientific-alone mode of acquiring knowledge to be an impoverishing trait, depriving mankind of a far richer and more complete state of awareness and being. Likewise, it would also point to how social policies that are largely calculative and utilitarian, impair relationships and ties of affection between fellow citizens. Neither, it should be noted, is such positivist leaning defensible in the first place: it is an illusion to believe that in the scientific domain there are no traces of faith. In fact, the very opposite is true when one realizes that the foundational blocks of the scientific enterprise are resting on faith (such as faith in the lawfulness of nature and finite causation<sup>84</sup>). Science cannot advance without such premises or acts of faith and neither can any individual function if no assumptions are ever going to be sensibly made in his or her daily life. In other words, there is nothing in principle false or wrong about the practice of faith. Faith is operational everywhere in our lives, inside as well as outside religion. Clinging onto a philosophy where only empirically verifiable facts can be trusted prevents humanity from further developing their abilities in the areas of wisdom and sensible judgement, both at the individual as well as the collective level. An openness of mind is called for that recognizes the limits of measurable approaches in our everyday concerns, but one which still retains a quiet certitude that within us we have the capabilities to wisely judge aright those important but non-quantifiable problems that continually face humanity. Religion would emphasize however, that these capabilities are fundamentally spiritual in nature.

The diversity of mankind and its plurality of viewpoints becomes a problem for social cohesion when each individual insists upon his freedoms and his rights, especially the right to hold onto his viewpoints as well as to pursue the chosen ends of those viewpoints. Religion, which immensely values freedom for the individual man (after all, for man to love God, the first step of turning towards God must be freely made), nevertheless would say that secular man and society has misunderstood and malpractised freedom. To put this point in another way, religion states that just as man needs freedom, he also needs authority – an authority to teach him and to guide him.<sup>85</sup> In the realm of religion, the Messenger of

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<sup>84</sup> S.E. Maxwell, H.D. Delancy, *Designing Experiments and Analyzing Data*, pp. 6-11.

<sup>85</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.308-310

God is the ultimate teacher of moral standards for humanity. In all processes of education, this relationship of authority (between the teacher and student) exists, and one important prerequisite of an effective learning experience is reverence of that relationship. The proper understanding of this authority (and it must not be confused with the totally separate concept of authoritarianism) applies not only to models of teaching secular knowledge, but also, and perhaps more importantly, ethical knowledge. In the latter instance, the moral qualities of the teacher or leader are fundamentally crucial. In our secular world, because of misunderstandings related to freedom and authority as well as the moral torpidity of many of its teachers and leaders, standards of effective education, in particular, ethical education, are progressively eroding, (but which is being ignored by fashionable references to the phenomenon of moral relativity). This withering moral dimension has correspondingly diminished our collective vision of the nobility of man, leading in turn to impoverished ideas as to what progress for humanity can be and how it can be brought about.

As a result of the continual erosion of moral knowledge and wisdom, and because the secular schools of moral philosophy (such as utilitarian and deontological ethics) cannot provide a lastingly effective inspiration towards selfless behaviour or the overcoming of prejudices, cohesion at the level of society will always be sensed (if at all present in the first place) as an uneasy truce of sorts (Religion itself being a source of another prejudice is discussed further below). While the religious viewpoint recognizes the importance of the contribution of technical advances (in the natural as well as social sciences, including those of economics and politics) towards social progress, and sees their necessity, by itself scientific knowledge is regarded as insufficient for social unity. The technical realm of science will only lead to meaningful and effective social improvements when it is coupled with adherence to moral principles. As long as the ethical realm is not given due attention or is devoid, at its centre, of the true love of God, social progress will always be incomplete and inadequate.<sup>86</sup> In brief, at all levels of society, the problem is that its citizens are not being sufficiently inspired to care for each other's welfare. Thus, the ever-present, ubiquitous examples of multi-layered and multi-faceted corruption, the widening income gap

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<sup>86</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 107



between the rich and poor, injustice stemming from racial, religious or gender-based prejudices – all of these cannot be resolved by scientific advances or the technical methods of socio-economic reforms alone.

### *Spiritual Maladies*

Religion has always recognized how it itself can be the source of countless problems for humanity. Its most important diagnosis here is that, as a result of erroneous knowledge of God, religious adherents themselves can have ignorance, superstitions and prejudice that they (and in particular, the ecclesiastical leaders) are not aware of, nor have critically examined. In fact, religious leaders themselves have vested interests in fermenting such ignorance and bigotry amongst their followers, so that their own positions of power are maintained or enhanced.<sup>87</sup>

Among those who are willing to independently search for the true meanings of their religious beliefs, tensions can very often arise between them and their religious leaders or institutions. The role of critical thinking and freedom of interpretation vis-à-vis obedience to religious authority are matters that are not explicitly addressed in many religions, resulting thus in religious extremism as well as the splintering of religions into innumerable sects.

There is the additional and pervasive problem of insincerity or hypocrisy amongst religious adherents leading to all forms of double standards and an ever-widening divorce between words and deeds. Part of this challenge arises because of insufficient acknowledgement and discussion of the existential difficulties and psychological attachments that also face the religious community. The mere espousal of a religious belief is not going to automatically remove fundamental existential burdens and attachments, and further education about how specifically religion can help in this regard is vitally needed. Instead, what happens often enough is that these difficulties and dilemmas remain unexamined or rationalized away, rendering the exercise of moral courage and recovery of the moral position more difficult. In sum, the above problems in religion also contribute to prejudices and crime, the very problems decried by religion. In fact, murders committed in the name of religion often come with a

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<sup>87</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 56-58

disturbing ferocity, as their perpetrators are ready to sacrifice their lives, believing fervently that their misdeeds are being conducted for the sake of God.

Knowing the distinctions between the true and false practices of religions as well as acknowledging the genuine difficulties and challenges of conducting the true practice are subject matters that are insufficiently addressed in religion. Instead, what is too often seen (perhaps because they are easier topics, not requiring painful reflection) is zealous missionary activity and feelings of moral superiority insidiously weaving their ways into many religious communities.

#### D) Prescription for our maladies

The solution to all ills (be they in the secular or religious realms, at the individual or societal levels) is the love of God, but it is a love that has to begin with the knowledge of God.<sup>88</sup> As stated earlier, this apprehension of God (based partly on reason and partly on faith) is tantamount to knowing the Messenger or the Manifestation of God – by knowing His life history and by reading and reflecting upon His revelation (the Words of God).<sup>89</sup> Striving to obey the laws of God further increases this knowledge.<sup>90</sup> This process of knowing God demands from the seeker an independent and unbiased search where religious beliefs must be tested for their reasonableness and rationality.<sup>91</sup> It is only in this way that extreme and false practices of religion as well as blind following of religious leaders can be avoided. For this reason, therefore, there are no priests in the Bahá'í Faith. The responsibility of knowing what religion is all about, and what should be done in relation to its injunctions rests totally with the individual believer.

The rational examination of the Manifestation of God and His revelation must end with a decision ultimately about His truth. The promise made in the Bahá'í Writings is that the capacity to recognize the Manifestation's truth, by the above-mentioned means, is within all of us.<sup>92</sup> Once this truth is acknowledged, the knowledge of God leads to the love of God (a never-

<sup>88</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.300

<sup>89</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.105

<sup>90</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.268

<sup>91</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.63-64

<sup>92</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p.65

ending experience). Again it is important to reiterate that the only way to avoid the false form of the love of God is by critically and independently examining our knowledge of God. With the love of God, a two-fold obligation exists: to remain steadfast in the love and obedience of His revealed ordinances<sup>93</sup> (which promotes moral order at both the individual and societal levels). From such a standpoint, the principles of the oneness of God, religions and humanity are accepted. Consequently, the loving submission to God, the acquisition of virtues and a saintly character, the rendering of sincere service to our fellow man and the working towards justice and unity at larger and larger social levels come about. What benefits others and society matches with the aspirations of the individual, and effectively brings about development. In this way of life, the individual manages to fuse the two seemingly paradoxical injunctions of religion, namely detachment (from all, except God) and commitment (to work for the betterment of this world).

While secular humanistic ideals are sometimes described as a suitable alternative to religious ideals, the Bahá'í Writings make it clear that for a truly lasting and effective ethical lifestyle to be adopted, it has to be based on the knowledge and love of God. Otherwise, that ethical lifestyle will be "imperfect" – it will be ineffectual and will not be able to diffuse itself into society at large.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, if one were to judge perceptively and fairly, it will be noted that actually in the first place, all humanistic ideals, even when described in secular terms, have historically arisen from the inspiration and beauty of religious teachings.<sup>95</sup>

## Conclusion

In this paper, some of the core concepts of the materialist perspective of the human condition have been contrasted with those of the religious perspective (see Table 1). Out of necessity, given the constraints of space (as well as the author's present abilities), these concepts have been covered broadly rather than explored in depth (including the missing area of the apparent differences that some religions themselves may have in

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<sup>93</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.268

<sup>94</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 303, 305

<sup>95</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *ibid*, p.304

the spiritual understanding of the human condition). Though there are some similarities between the materialist and religious perspectives, they are so only at the superficial level. Further analysis shows that the core beliefs of the two perspectives lead to fundamentally very different answers to the questions of who we are, what our world is and how we should live our lives. Thus, while at the simple level, the purpose of human existence from both the secular and spiritual paradigms is described to be happiness, the contents and basis of that happiness as well as their surrounding assumptions are very different indeed.

**Table 1 The Human Condition: Summary of Main Concepts**

Human Nature	Secular (Materialist) Paradigm	Spiritual (Religious) Paradigm
• Composition	Composed of matter	Three realities of existence: matter, soul and spirit
• Determinants of human nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- By our genes</li> <li>- By our (often unconscious) psychological forces</li> <li>- By society's policies and values (including mode of economic production)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Soul's potential is determined by its orientation towards, and love for, God.</li> </ul>
• Human traits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reason is a slave of emotions/passions</li> <li>-Reason is supreme and controls emotions</li> <li>-Man is rationally self-centred (economic man)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Reason is man's supreme virtue but he also needs faith to enable love of God to grow.</li> <li>-Degree of love of God determines degree of soul's spiritual qualities</li> </ul>
• Purpose of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-To achieve material happiness: pleasure, wealth, fame (at individual level); socio-economic progress (at society level).</li> <li>-More knowledge and</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-To attain spiritual as well as material happiness; in fact, material progress must be founded upon spiritual principles (at both individual and society levels). Highest</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of fate and death</li> </ul>	<p>scientific advancements needed for material happiness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-More knowledge needed to reduce negative impact of fate. Dream is to control fate, making it more predictable.</li> <li>-Significance of death: no comments offered to the universal existential anxiety about death.</li> </ul>	<p>social goal is unity.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Scientific knowledge must be linked with spiritual knowledge for humanity's happiness</li> <li>-Love of God is equivalent to recognizing "He doeth as He willeth". The response to fate is to accept calmly that which is beyond our control.</li> <li>-Death is liberation from this existence and the soul's moving to another dimension to continue its spiritual growth.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of ethical behaviour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Secular ethical theories can be developed but there are problems of moral relativity and not being able to inspire moral commitment. Self-interests often collide with society's interests.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ethical norms are founded upon the knowledge and love of God inspiring man to be of service to all. Self-interests (spiritual growth) match society's interests.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Of freedom and equality/oneness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Vitally needed for individual's legitimate pursuits of material happiness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Vitally needed for both material and spiritual happiness but they must be understood in the context of the knowledge and love of God.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• World Around Us</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This world and universe is the one and only reality that we know and we have to solve its problems and make it a better place</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- This world and universe is real but not the Ultimate reality</li> <li>- We must be committed to the world's betterment while remaining spiritually detached from it.</li> </ul>

The greatest attractiveness of the materialist perspective is that it is immediately perceivable, systematically verifiable and immensely pragmatic for our earthly existence. Since that approach of empiricism and rationality has undeniably brought, and continues to bring, major scientific advances, there really appears to be no serious alternative. Yet this very same strength of scientific materialism becomes also its greatest weakness when we move from the material and technological realm to the ethical and meaning-related realm. Human nature is such that the ethical and meaning-related realm is as vital as the material and technological realm for happiness. In the arena of ethics and meaning however, as this paper has pointed out, scientific materialism has major methodological limitations that are most clearly demonstrated in its inability to give a coherent perspective on the finality and mystery of death.

The greatest strength of the religious perspective is that it offers rich and satisfying answers to deep queries in the ethical and meaning-related realm. Yet religion also emphasizes the importance and need for both rationality and science. What has therefore been argued in this work is that finally, it is the religious paradigm (as opposed to the materialist paradigm) that embraces both the above realms more effectively and that it is thus able to offer humanity, at both the individual and social level, better prospects for effective and lasting happiness.

Nevertheless, religion faces two significant challenges in the contemporary world. Firstly, since so many of its central tenets are not within the immediately observable range, religion will need to more openly discuss the basis of distinguishing between the proper and improper ways of understanding religion and how religious faith differs from religious fanaticism. The relationship between rationality and faith needs far more public clarification and so too does the demarcation between legitimate and illegitimate religion. In an era where a misinformed individual can do incalculable damage, far too many religion-based tragedies are already arising from lack of clarity on these issues. Secondly, even within the arena of proper religious understanding, the time has pressingly come for religious attitudes and endeavours to shift from an insular and inward-looking mould to a far more open and world-embracing one. Especially important in this regard is furthering the development of religious practice (applied religion, parallel to the concept of applied science). Religion cannot afford to be only discussing abstract



subject matters (such as soul and spirit) and being engaged with social charities, important as these activities are. In this era, religion must be prepared to do far more so that its adherents are truly able to contribute to the betterment of the world.

As this paper has tried to show, the secular world is in want of more ideas and examples to transcend its many dilemmas (such as the existentialist anxieties of meaninglessness, aloneness and death as well as the difficulties of incorporating both equity and efficiency into economic progress). It is the duty of religion to first, respectfully and intelligently, apply its cherished spiritual principles into a practical and useful format so as to develop reasonable solutions to the real problems of the world and then to offer these solutions for further discussion in both academic and public settings. Finally, religion must also be prepared to demonstrate by action the actual effectiveness of its proposed solutions (even if its results can only be seen in the long run). Needless to say, such engagements with the world will require from religious adherents both profound religious knowledge as well as profound technical knowledge, and no doubt, sincere spiritual qualities. But this is a challenge that religion cannot turn down, given the world's current ills and it is only with such engagement (through both sensible, practical ideas and inspiring, selfless action) that the true beauty and value of religion becomes clearer for all to see.

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At various points of presenting and writing this paper, images of Antonella Khursheed came by in relation to my earlier 1999 paper when I became aware of her dedication and determination to help Bahá'í scholarship in our community. While this paper's quality does not match

to her standards, its underlying efforts have been arduous and sincere enough and it is thus humbly dedicated to her memory.

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