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Bloch's Philosophy of Hope and the Bahá'í Writings

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Introduction

At first glance, any comparison between Ernst Bloch's "philosophy of hope" and the Bahá'í Writings looks like an unpromising venture. What could the ideas of a Marxist philosopher, even an exiled renegade like Bloch, have in common with a religious world-view based on divine revelation or the authorized interpretations thereof? However, despite superficial appearances, the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch share one key underlying similarity – adherence to an evolutionary world-view. Both agree that reality is a teleological process in which all things strive to actualize their inherent potentials and thereby to complete themselves in their highest possible condition. The drive to completion, or entelechy,¹ is found in varying degrees in inanimate objects, living things and above all, in human beings both as individuals and communities. This universal striving for the "Not Yet,"² for the better future, forms the basis for a new metaphysics and a new understanding of human nature and history as well as humankind's religious evolution. Because the key concepts and language of this process world-view – for example 'actuality,' 'actualize,' 'potentials', 'teleology' and 'entelechy' – were first systematically

1. F. E Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1967), p. 57.

2. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, trans. by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 75.

developed by Aristotle,³ this outlook might well be described as 'Aristotelian.'⁴

Before we proceed, however, it should be made clear that the Bahá'í Writings are divine revelation and not simply another philosophy. In the words of Shoghi Effendi:

For the Cause is not a system of philosophy; it is essentially a way of life, a religious faith that seeks to unite all people on a common basis of mutual understanding and love, and in a common devotion to God.⁵

However, while the Bahá'í Faith is not a philosophy in itself, it does, nonetheless, encompass philosophy within its framework, as made clear by Shoghi Effendi's references to "the Bahá'í philosophy of progressive revelation,"⁶ and "the Bahá'í philosophy of social and political organization."⁷ Furthermore, it should also be noted that Shoghi Effendi points out that the Writings have philosophical aspects, when, for example, he states,

Nor should a review of the outstanding features of Bahá'u'lláh's writings during the latter part of His banishment to Akká fail to include a reference to the Lawh-i-Hikmat (Tablet of Wisdom), *in which He sets forth the fundamentals of true philosophy.*⁸ Here, Shoghi Effendi clearly states that the Writings encompass a "true philosophy" the "fundamentals" of which are given by Bahá'u'lláh. Unfortunately, we cannot pursue the possible implications of this statement.⁹

3. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* and *Physics* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Inc., 1952).

4. A more detailed study of this can be found in Ian Kluge, "The Aristotelian Substratum of the Bahá'í Writings," *Lights of Irfan*, vol. 4 (Evanston, IL: Irfán Colloquium, 2003). Vincent Geoghegan writes, Bloch "is clearly excited by what he terms 'left-wing Aristotelianism' . . . particularly of Aristotle's notion of the realization or 'entelechy' of matter." Vincent Geoghegan, *Ernst Bloch* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 29. Bloch traced this aspect of Aristotle's philosophy down to Hegel.

5. Shoghi Effendi, *Directives from the Guardian*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 75.

6. Shoghi Effendi, *The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community* (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 432.

7. Shoghi Effendi, *The Light of Divine Guidance*, vol. I (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 55.

8. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 219. Emphasis added.

9. For example, could two different, even contradictory philosophies be developed from the same foundational truths provided by Bahá'u'lláh and thereby illustrate "unity in diversity"? Or do the Writings provide the "fundamentals" for one over-arching philosophy for the unified world?

Shoghi Effendi not only recognizes that the Writings encompass a philosophy but also encouraged Bahá'ís to undertake studies correlating the Writings to developments in philosophy:

It is hoped that all the Bahá'í students will . . . *be led to investigate and analyse the principles of the Faith and to correlate them with the modern aspects of philosophy and science.* Every intelligent and thoughtful young Bahá'í should always approach the Cause in this way, for therein lies the very essence of the principle of independent investigation of truth.¹⁰

Such 'correlation work' is obviously important because it makes the Bahá'í teachings part of the discussions of contemporary issues and this, in itself, is valuable to the discussions themselves as well as being useful in teaching and dialoguing with other philosophies and belief systems. In particular, elucidating the correlations with Bloch's *Principle of Hope* opens the door to dialogue with such highly influential Christian theologians as Jürgen Moltmann, author of *Theology of Hope*. This work, a conscious application of Bloch's philosophy to Christian teachings inspired the 'theology of hope' movement among contemporary Christians.

Finally, this introduction should make it clear that although this paper will focus on the foundational similarities between the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch, there are differences that generate irresolvable tension between them. While there is considerable agreement in regards to ontology, the philosophy of human nature and even God, there are obvious differences with Bloch's misguided application of his philosophy to support the dictatorship of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Such support contradicts Bahá'u'lláh's frequent condemnations of oppression as a hindrance to human unity and progress:

So long, however, as the thick clouds of oppression, which obscures the day star of justice, remain undispelled, it would be difficult for the glory of this station [of unity] to be unveiled to men's eyes. . . .¹¹

10. Letter to an individual believer on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, August 6, 1933, in *Scholarship* (Compilation) (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 17. Emphasis added.

11. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 287.

‘Abdu'l-Bahá also rebukes oppressive regimes such as those Bloch supported by saying:

When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail, that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs, development and growth are inevitable.¹²

Another problem is Bloch's support for partisan politics, something that Bahá'ís are required to avoid because of its disunifying effects on society. Instead, Bahá'ís are encouraged to focus on the positive growth-facilitating potentials in social developments.¹³ Nor do the Bahá'í Writings agree with Bloch's support for radical and subversive movements:

Let there be no misgivings as to the animating purpose of the world-wide Law of Bahá'u'lláh. *Far from aiming at the subversion of the existing foundations of society*, it seeks to broaden its basis, to remold its institutions in a manner consonant with the needs of an ever-changing world. It can conflict with no legitimate allegiances, nor can it undermine essential loyalties. Its purpose is neither to stifle the flame of a sane and intelligent patriotism in men's hearts, nor to abolish the system of national autonomy.¹⁴

In other words, Bahá'ís are not political revolutionaries dedicated to overthrowing governments. Rather, Bahá'ís are ‘evolutionaries’ who believe in fostering progress by developing, i.e. actualizing, the positive growth potentials in individuals and society.

The conclusion to draw from these differences is that Bloch's own application of his foundational ideas to the particular political situations of his time is problematical and contradictory to the Bahá'í Writings. However, this difference with Bloch's political application need not prevent us from recognizing a number of foundational similarities with the Writings and from applying these in a manner consistent with Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. While Bahá'í Writings converge with Bloch's ontology, and much of his philosophy of man and God, they diverge considerably regarding the practical application of these ideas.

12. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 197.

13. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 41.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 41. Emphasis added.

Ontology: All things in teleological process

Ontology concerns our theory of reality, i.e., our beliefs about the nature of being and the structure of reality.¹⁵ The subjects covered by ontology concern the most basic aspects of reality, such as what is or is not 'real', stasis and change, the origin of reality and the basic 'stuff' of the universe. Because ontology answers these foundational questions about the nature of reality, it directly and indirectly shapes our views on virtually all other philosophical subjects such as epistemology, ethics, philosophy of science as well as existential issues of individuality, meaning and value. Given the importance of ontology, we shall begin our comparisons between the Bahá'í Faith and Bloch's philosophy with a study of their commonalities.

Bloch and the philosophy embedded in the Bahá'í Writings are process philosophies in which the universe and all its phenomena are not only inherently dynamic but are also in orderly change to actualize their intrinsic potentials as completely as possible. However, because nothing is ever complete, but always possesses other potentials to actualize, Bloch calls his view "[t]he ontology of Not-yet-being."¹⁶

According to the Bahá'í Writings, "phenomenal existence"¹⁷ i.e., the material world¹⁸ is characterized by ceaseless change. `Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Know that nothing which exists remains in a state of repose--that is to say, all things are in motion . . . this state of motion is said to be essential – that is, natural; it cannot be separated from beings because it is their essential requirement.¹⁹

In this categorical assertion, `Abdu'l-Bahá emphasizes that movement and change are necessary to phenomenal existence, a theme he also emphasizes by saying, "Divine and all encompassing Wisdom hath

15. Ted Honderich, ed, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1995), p. 634.

16. Ernst Bloch, *Atheism in Christianity*, trans. By J. T. Swann (London: Verso, 2009), p. 55.

17. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 284.

18. *Ibid.*

19. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990), p. 233. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 284.

ordained that motion be an inseparable concomitant of existence . . . »²⁰
 'Motion' in these statements refers not only to a change in space but also to a change in time, in condition, in relationship, in appearance, constitution or structure, intensity, color, size shape – indeed, any kind of accidental or essential difference between two moments in the existence of an entity. Change does not just refer to the material but to the spiritual as well. Even our souls are subject to change, as evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that the soul is "in motion and ever active,"²¹ something also apparent in the concept of the soul's continued evolution after death.

The process philosophy inherent in the Bahá'í Writings is not mere random, directionless change; it also makes clear that phenomenal change has a direction and a goal, i.e. is teleological or possesses a final cause. This, too, agrees with Aristotle.²² 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

. . . for the existence of everything depends upon four causes – the efficient cause, the matter, the form and the final cause. For example, this chair has a maker who is a carpenter, a substance, which is wood, a form, which is that of a chair, and a purpose which is that it is to be used as a seat.²³

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, each of the four causes contributes to the formation of a thing; for a chair to exist, there must be wood (or metal, plastic); there must be someone who shapes the pieces for their various functions; there must be a plan/form according to which the pieces are shaped and put together, and finally, the plan/form must come into being to fulfill a certain goal, i.e., the final cause. The process of making the chair possesses its own entelechy or drive to completion which attains actuality in the chair itself.

Because the Bahá'í Writings are not just philosophy but revealed scripture, they also express this belief in goal-orientation, in teleology in religious language. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes, "From this same God all creation sprang into existence, and He is the one *goal, towards which*

20. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet of the Universe* (Original Tablet in *Makatib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 1. http://bahai-library.com/?file=abdulbaha_lawh_aflakiyyih.html). Anonymous Translation. 13-32.

21. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to Auguste Forel*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 8.

22. Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198 a, b; *Metaphysics*, V, 1, 1013 a, b.

23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280. The concept of four-fold causality and the names for the four types of causes originate in Aristotle.

everything in nature yearns."²⁴ This concept is also found in the following prayer by Bahá'u'lláh:

Lauded be Thy name, O my God and the God of all things, my Glory and the Glory of all things, my Desire and *the Desire of all things*, my Strength and the Strength of all things, my King and the King of all things, my Possessor and the Possessor of all things, my Aim and *the Aim of all things*, my Mover and *the Mover of all things!*²⁵

Here we have a reference to the goal or "Aim" oriented nature of every being, as well as the universal desire for God as the ultimate destination of the striving of "all things." We also observe that God is the "Mover of all things." This means not only that God provides the energy by which everything moves or develops but also that God is the Great Attractor or the "Prime Mover"²⁶ towards which all things move in their desire for actualization and completion.

In the Bahá'í Writings, the ultimate goal is to evolve into a higher and God-like condition though, of course, no phenomenal being can ever attain God's ontological state.²⁷ However, the mediate goal by which we strive towards this final end is the actualization of latent potentials. Theologically, these potentials are often described as the "sign" or "names" of God made visible in all created things. Bahá'u'lláh states:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the *attributes and names of God*, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light . . . To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things, hath been invested with the robe of such gifts, and hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are *potentially revealed* all the attributes and names of God.²⁸

These "attributes and names of God" are "potentially revealed" most abundantly in humankind but also in all phenomenal beings, which must actualize these potentials for them to be disclosed in the phenomenal

24. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1995), p. 51. Emphasis added.

25. Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987), p. 58. Emphasis added.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 262.

27. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 233-34.

28. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 177. Emphasis added. See also pp. 65-66.

world. However, for human beings, having these attributes “latent within [man]”²⁹ is not enough; humans must work or labor to actualize them since “[t]he radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror.”³⁰ This, of course, suggests the importance of the work and labor by which humans ‘make themselves’ in realizing their potentials individually and socially and, thereby, developing throughout history. In that way Bahá'í ontology provides the foundation for the teaching that work performed in the spirit of service is worship and, by extension, the inherent dignity of labor.³¹

In addition, the Writings refer to the existence of potentials directly when they note the virtues “potential in the seed,”³² of the sun awakening “all that is potential in the earth,”³³ of the “virtues potential in mankind,”³⁴ of the inventions “potential in the world of nature”³⁵ and of the embryo progressing until “that which was potential in it – namely, the human image – appears.”³⁶ Of similar import are the passages referring to the “mysteries latent in nature”³⁷ which are actualized by humankind, the “latent talents”³⁸ hidden in human beings, the “divine perfections latent in the heart of man,”³⁹ the “latent realities within the bosom of the earth,”⁴⁰ and the “the greater world, the macrocosm . . . latent and miniature in the lesser world, or microcosm, of man.”⁴¹ The same idea is implicit in Bahá'u'lláh's statement that we are to “[r]egard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value,”⁴² which is to say that humankind possesses invaluable potentials that must be actualized through education. `Abdu'l-Bahá provides a philosophical argument for the reality of these potentials when he says, “no sign can come from a non-existing thing.”⁴³ Because potentials give real results, they must be real. If they were not, there could be no changes since these changes cannot come from nothing.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

30. *Ibid.*, pp. 65-66.

31. Bahá'í International Community. 1989, Jan. 02. *Position Statement on Education*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>)

32. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 91.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 309.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 359.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 52.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

40. `Abdu'l-Bahá. *Foundations of World Unity* (Wilmette IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 70.

41. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 69-70.

42. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 260.

43. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 225.

Since the concept of teleological change and actualizing potentials is often misunderstood it is worthwhile to engage in a brief digression to correct several common misapprehensions and to explain it in a manner amenable to modern readers. First, the final or formal causes need not be conscious intentions or plans as critics often assume; Aristotle who invented the concept of four-fold causality explicitly rejects this idea.⁴⁴ Therefore, final causality can also apply to unconscious natural processes. Second, as several contemporary philosophers have pointed out, the final cause may be viewed as referring to the laws of nature which limit physical processes i.e., the action of efficient causes, to a limited number of results. For example, we cannot sow iron filings and harvest sunflowers. Whatever changes iron filings may undergo, the laws of nature do not allow a change into sunflowers; at each moment, natural laws restrict changes to a certain number of outcomes though they do not guide towards these outcomes consciously.⁴⁵ This step-by-step guidance leads to the identical goal in identical processes. In other words, as Aristotle points out, the efficient, formal and final causes act together.⁴⁶ Thus, a process does not simply proceed randomly to any possible outcome; it is subject to limits imposed by physical laws, and these physical laws ensure that each aspect of the efficient cause (process) attains only certain ends until a final stage is reached. In the words of philosopher W. Norris Clarke:

[i]f the efficient cause at the moment of its productive action is not interiorly [inherently] determined or focused towards producing this effect rather than that, then there is no sufficient reason why it should produce this one rather than that.⁴⁷

Efficient causes always lead to particular effects, and if nothing constrains an efficient cause from acting one way or another, any effect at all could follow randomly from any action. However, nature provides regularly observable effects – the very basis of science – so, therefore, efficient causality is constrained by an inherent limitation, i.e., final causality.

44. Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 8, 199b.

45. Henry B Veatch, *Aristotle: A Contemporary Appreciation* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1974), p. 48. See also Norris Clark, *The One and the Many* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre dame Press, 2006), pp. 200-01.

46. Aristotle, *Physics*, II, 7, 198a.

47. W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2006), p. 201.

The concept of a dynamic teleological world process of actualizing potentials forms the ontological basis for Bloch's philosophy of hope. He writes:

Only with the farewell to the closed, static concept of being does the real dimension of hope open. Instead, *the world is full of propensity towards something, tending towards something, latency of something*, and this intended something means *fulfillment of the intending*.⁴⁸

In other words, the universe is active, a process that is open to genuinely novel developments in the future. But more than that, all processes have entelechy, a drive to completion or "fulfillment" of their latencies; consequently, all things have a future orientation as required by a philosophy of hope. Consciously or not, they aim to realize themselves at their highest level of development, which he identifies with their 'utopia.' These latencies or potentials are as real as the actually manifested attributes of things and help to establish their essential identity; the potentials a thing possesses constitute part of what it is and distinguish it from the rest of reality both as a member of a class of things and as an individual. Moreover, because all things possess the entelechy to complete themselves to the maximal possible degree, Bloch is able to claim that 'utopia,' the aim for one's highest possible state, is an integral part of the real world and that our understanding of this world is incomplete unless we take them into account.

Reality without real possibilities is not complete, the world without future-laden propensities does not deserve a glance . . . *Concrete utopia stands on the horizon* of every reality; real possibility surrounds the open dialectical tendencies and latencies to the very last.⁴⁹

Because all things have real potentials, Bloch describes them as "not yet"⁵⁰ or "Not-Yet-Being"⁵¹ involved in "venturing beyond"⁵² themselves as they are, i.e., engaged in 'self-transcendence.' They seek to complete themselves by striving for the "concrete utopia," i.e., their best possible

48. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 18. Emphasis added.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 223. Emphasis added.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 114. Bloch uses the phrase "not-yet" in various combinations throughout his books, as in "not-yet-conscious," *ibid.*, p. 113 or "That-Which-Is-Not-Yet," *ibid.*, p. 237. The purpose is to indicate the incomplete nature of all things.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 140.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

state of being and in that sense, hope is an inherent and objective part of their existence. It “is not merely a projection of reason, a ‘mental creation’ of human thought but an expression of what is really possible.”⁵³

The “concrete utopia” standing “on the horizon of every reality” is the ontological basis for hope, the positive forward orientation towards new actualizations of other potentials and the fulfillment of each potential at its highest level. In humans, this structurally present hope comes to light as “anticipatory consciousness” in which we are guided by what we know could be. This may manifest as dreams, day-dreams (Bloch distinguishes the two) in literature or film and even political manifestoes. Hope, therefore, is not merely a personal subjective response, but rather is an epistemological act based on awareness of the nature of reality itself. To say it paradoxically, hope is realistic; indeed, it is the only realistic attitude towards reality because it alone recognizes the intrinsic drive to actualize and complete inherent potentials.

At this point it is clear that despite the differences of language, the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch's philosophy of hope share similar ontologies regarding the process nature of the phenomenal world. This is important because it means that many of the similarities between the two philosophies are foundational, i.e., grounded in similar ontologies and are, therefore, essential and are not merely coincidental or accidental. However, because the Bahá'í Writings are religious in nature and Bloch's work comes from the militantly anti-religious Marxist tradition, we shall have to examine whether there is any meeting or at least convergence on the subject of God. We shall examine this later.

On the basis of this teleological, forward-looking ontology, Bloch and the Bahá'í Writings also share a fundamentally positive or optimistic outlook on the phenomenal world, human nature and history. There are always two processes going on in human development – a declining process but more importantly, a growing or developing process as new, hitherto hidden potentials actualize or manifest themselves.

Precisely because of this forward-looking vision, Bloch describes his philosophy as ‘utopian.’ For him, ‘utopian’ does not refer to dreams of impossibly perfect societies, people or environments; rather, it refers to the intrinsic drive of all things to the actualization and completion or perfection of their own potentials. Glimmers of this drive can be detected in even the most decrepit and degenerate human productions, so there is always something positive to observe in them. Amidst the dead, decaying, historical forms of religions or culture we can still find a living, humanly

53. Ze'ev Levy, “*Utopia and Reality*,” in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (New York: Verso, 1970), p. 177.

worthwhile aspect, which Bloch calls the “utopian surplus”⁵⁴ or a “cultural surplus.”⁵⁵ This surplus is worth salvaging or re-inventing in a new form as culture evolves.

In the Bahá'í Writings, this positive outlook is evident in the doctrine of “progressive revelation” in which Manifestations provide a *restatement of the eternal verities* underlying all the religions of the past, as a unifying force instilling into the adherents of these religions a *new spiritual vigor*, infusing them with a *new hope* and love for mankind, firing them with a *new vision* of fundamental unity of their religious doctrines, and unfolding to their eyes the *glorious destiny* that awaits the human race.⁵⁶

In this one statement we readily discern convergences with Bloch's philosophy. The “eternal verities” retained and developed by successive Manifestations are reflected in Bloch's “utopian surplus” or “cultural surplus” that should be saved and integrated into future developments. The hopeful, positive spirit is seen in the “new spiritual vigor,” the “new hope” and the “glorious destiny” which the new revelation infuses into humankind. These phrases also implicitly contain the idea of progress that is so essential to Bloch because a “new vision,” or “new spirit” require that some teachings that are not “eternal verities” will be left behind as we move beyond them. The positive attitude that Bloch and the Writings share is succinctly and vividly conveyed by `Abdu'l-Bahá's story of Jesus and the dead dog. Seeing a decaying dog carcass, the disciples remarked how awful it looked and smelled, to which Christ replied by pointing out its shining white teeth.⁵⁷ This story illustrates the attitude Bahá'ís are encouraged to cultivate. Bahá'ís are encouraged to look for positive, ‘utopian’ signs of development as humanity actualizes the potential for a spiritually unified global society even though these ‘utopian’ signs are often found among symptoms of decay and degeneration of an old and dying world order.

Thus, for Bloch and the Bahá'í Writings, the criticism that their proposals and teachings are ‘utopian’ is not negative, but rather, positive because for them the term ‘utopian’ refers to the essential nature, a genuine inherent impulse, of all phenomenal beings. Because all things

54. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, trans. by Anthony A. Nassar (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2000), p. 196.

55. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, p. 164.

56. Shoghi Effendi, *Summary Statement - 1947, Special UN Committee on Palestine*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>). Emphasis added.

57. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Center, 1978), p. 169.

strive for their potential utopian state, the Lesser and the Most Great Peace are not impossible dreams but realizable intrinsic possibilities of the human condition that are available for individual and collective choice and subsequent action. It is up to us to develop the “anticipatory consciousness”⁵⁸ that allows us to recognize and actualize the “emancipatory potential,”⁵⁹ in our personal and collective situations. Doing so requires what Bloch calls a “rationalism of the heart,”⁶⁰ which goes beyond the “thinking theoretical Cartesian subject”⁶¹ and the “reflexive mechanics”⁶² of abstract intellectuality.

The philosophy of God

Were Ernst Bloch a militantly polemical “new atheist” in the manner of Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens or a philosophical atheist like Marx, Freud, Bertrand Russell or Jean-Paul Sartre, it would be extraordinarily difficult if not impossible to harmonize his beliefs with those of the Bahá'í Writings on the subject of God. However, while Bloch certainly portrayed himself as a Marxist, the issue of his ‘atheism’ is far from clear. In the first place, he made prolonged efforts to salvage a useable “utopian surplus”⁶³ from humanity’s religious past, especially from Judaism and Christianity, though he also accepted other religions as well as mythology as repositories of the “utopian surplus.” Obviously he does not really think of religion as nothing but “opium”⁶⁴ for the people.

In his struggle to adapt the “utopian surplus” from religion, Bloch “refunctioned”⁶⁵ i.e., re-interpreted certain religious motifs to show how ancient beliefs often pointed to values and/or ideas that were useful in other ages and in vastly different material-economic circumstances. For example, Bloch “re-functions” Christ, the “Son of Man” to represent a new awareness of the potentials inherent in earthly existence and human beings themselves.⁶⁶ This aspect of Christ is part of the enduring “utopian surplus” of human evolution, whereas the portrayal of Christ as the “Son of God” is, for Bloch, merely a dispensable artifact of a past cultural situation. Bloch’s ideas overlap somewhat with the Bahá'ís concept of

58. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 43.

59. Douglas Kellner, “Ernst Bloch, *Utopia and Ideology Critique*,” in *Not-Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (New York: Verso, 1970), p. 93.

60. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 176.

61. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

62. *Ibid.*

63. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 196.

64. Karl Marx, Introduction to “A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm#05>

65. Richard Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), p. 127.

66. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 201.

“progressive revelation,”⁶⁷ i.e., the belief that God sends successive Manifestations to restate the “eternal verities”⁶⁸ as humankind evolves, to separate essential from non-essential culture-bound elements, and to “separate the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions.”⁶⁹ Although different in their outward historical appearances, these Manifestations are spiritually one. Bloch’s ideas and the Bahá’í teaching of progressive revelation coincide on the existence of religious teachings that endure through time and are valid across cultural differences. This implies that religion has some positive value – an idea which conflicts with Marxism. On the other hand, Bloch’s philosophy cannot embrace the Bahá’í teaching that Manifestations are sent by God and are essentially one, sharing the station of “essential unity.”⁷⁰ However, as we have seen here, and will see below, Bloch’s philosophy has a very ‘porous border’ with religion; its atheism is an accidental feature of his philosophy, whereas its openness to the transcendent and God is foundational or essential.

Furthermore, Bloch’s beliefs about the ontological reality of potentials raise questions about the nature of his atheism. Bloch admits that his ontology is not compatible with strict materialism, which he actually describes as “vulgar materialism,”⁷¹ i.e., a materialism that denies the existence of anything that cannot be measured and is not physical, be it matter or energy. But what about potentials and latencies? In material things, they have no physical existence as separable entities somehow ‘hidden’ in matter and in that sense are not objects of scientific study. Yet for Bloch (and the Baha’i Writings) they are as real as any physical attribute and are essential to understanding what a thing actually is. However, if potentials are real but not material or scientifically measurable, they must somehow be transcendent to phenomenal reality. But an obvious question arises. If these transcendent realities exist, then how do we rule out the existence of God, Who, like these potentials is also real but not material? There is nothing within Bloch’s philosophy that rules out God, although, God will have to be thought of in a non-traditional way. Indeed, as we shall see below, Bloch’s concept of God comes very close to one of `Abdu’l-Bahá’s characterizations of God.

Further exploration of Bloch’s quasi-atheism requires a brief detour through Ludwig Feuerbach’s radical theory about the nature of religion.

67. Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá’í Community* (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 432.

68. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 108.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 108.

70. Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 50.

71. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. III, p. 1292.

Here, too, we shall find similarities to the Bahá'í Writings. According to Feuerbach (1804-1872), humans make God in their image, just as the Greek philosopher Xenophanes of Colophon said that if oxen could imagine gods, they would imagine them as oxen” – a poetic pre-figuration of Feuerbach's concept of God as the outward projection or objectification of the human essence freed from all phenomenal limitations. Humans objectify or project their own inner nature – intelligence love, creativity, justice but also anger, a demand for obedience, a desire to punish – and they call this objectified image of themselves ‘God’ to Whom they give a separate existence that transcends phenomenal reality. In Feuerbach's view, humans free themselves from God by recognizing themselves in their image of God; then they are no longer in its power. When humans re-appropriate all of God's attributes back to themselves, God ceases to exist. He becomes no more than a negative idea without knowable content.

Bloch basically accepts the outlines of Feuerbach's view but develops it in his own direction. He agrees that “religious founders represent a mythologically disguised possibility of becoming human,”⁷² i.e., the God worshipped by humans is a perfected vision of ourselves disguised as existing transcendentally on a higher ontological, epistemological and ethical plane. For Bloch as for Feuerbach, atheism is the rejection of this projected, man-made vision of God.

The Bahá'í Writings have a remarkably similar outlook. They recognize that the images and conceptions of God that people possess are cultural and personal, i.e., do not – and cannot – reflect God as He actually is in Himself. These images of God are as the human imagination has shaped Him, usually not only as possessing our highest intellectual and moral ideals but also as possessing unlimited strength and enormous punitive powers. We project these idealized images of our deepest desires on the unknowable God. Our cognitive task is to recognize these images for the man-made projections they are and not to mistake them for the reality of God. For example, `Abdu'l-Bahá writes that people

. . . have pictured a god in the realm of the mind, and worship that image which they have made for themselves. . . . They have created a creator within their own minds, and they call it the Fashioner of all that is – whereas in truth it is but an illusion. Thus are the people worshipping only an error of perception.⁷³

72. Richard Roberts, *Hope and Its Hieroglyph*, p. 171.

73. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 53-54.

Of course, God, “that Essence of Essences, that Invisible of Invisibles, is sanctified above all human speculation, and never to be overtaken by the mind of man.”⁷⁴ Whatever virtues we attribute to God do not prove anything positive about God but only demonstrates that God does not lack them: when we praise God, “[w]e affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections.”⁷⁵ We must never mistake our images of God for God Himself.

This teaching is clearly foundational to the concept of progressive revelation which involves, among other things, the necessity of leaving old, no longer historically appropriate projections behind and advancing to higher levels of understanding. Our understanding of God matures as the human race develops materially and spiritually under the guidance of God’s Manifestations. Freeing ourselves from these projections opens new possibilities for spiritual, intellectual, artistic and social evolution and, therefore, has an emancipatory function for us. For example, progressive revelation can agree that our images of God can be shaped by our economic relationships, including what Marx refers to as the “relations of production”⁷⁶ i.e., the relationship between those who own the means of production and those who do not. However, when we understand the unknowability of God, we learn to free our images of God from our economically shaped projections and, thereby, free ourselves too from limiting effects of these man-made images. Of course, because of the limitations of human nature, we can never completely free ourselves from these limitations.

The difference between the Bahá'í Faith and Bloch is that the Bahá'í Faith does not regard the rejection of historically inappropriate projections of God as ‘atheism,’ i.e., the ontological non-existence of a non-material transcendental entity Who is the origin of the cosmos. It recognizes that we can accept the Feuerbachian thesis without necessarily adopting atheism. In other words, we do not need to read Feuerbach ontologically – as Bloch sometimes does – as a statement about God’s non-existence; rather, we can read Feuerbach epistemologically, i.e., as a statement about human knowledge and understanding of God. Our knowledge of God is limited but that limitation does not logically imply anything about God’s existence.

The epistemological reading of Bloch’s (and Feuerbach’s) ‘atheism’ can lead to an apophatic theology in which all positive assertions about

74. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

75. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.

76. Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. by Samuel Moore (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), p. 83.

God are, in the last analysis, rejected or at best accepted as a heuristic device as an aid to reflection. But that is all these assertions are since in Himself, God is unknowable, beyond human comprehension. This is close to the position of the Bahá'í Writings.

We speak of the names and attributes of the Divine Reality, and we praise Him by attributing to Him sight, hearing, power, life and knowledge. We affirm these names and attributes, not to prove the perfections of God, but to deny that He is capable of imperfections. When we look at the existing world, we see that ignorance is imperfection and knowledge is perfection; therefore, we say that the sanctified Essence of God is wisdom. . . .⁷⁷

ʿAbdu'l-Bahá emphasizes the inadequacy of our attributions to God – and thereby also opens the way to an apophatic theology in which our ignorance of God in Himself does not become a denial of His existence. Of course, the Writings are not limited to apophaticism since they also require the development of a historically and culturally appropriate positive theology on the basis of what the Manifestations reveal about God. Their revelations about God are the essence of the Bahá'í Faith and are sufficient to provide individual and collective guidance.

We may approach this subject from another angle. If God is unknowable to us, the question arises, 'Does God even exist?' While Feuerbach and subsequently Marx saw the concept of God only as an alienation of our human essence and therefore, rejected it, Bloch, and of course, the Bahá'í Faith do not follow the same path. According to Bloch, the 'space' left by the rejection of the projected God is not empty. For Bloch, God is the horizon or farthest extent of human possibilities, "the *metaphysical* correlate of this projection remains the hidden, the still undefined-undefinitive, the real Possible in the sense of mystery."⁷⁸ It seems that for Bloch, God continues as a "real Possible" for human evolution, as a goal for which to strive. Moreover, this is no man-made, psychologically created God – it is a "real Possible," something with ontological reality of some sort, for as Bloch says, this space occupied by the "real Possible" is not an illusion.⁷⁹

A little reflection helps us realize that a "real Possible" is essentially unknowable because as a 'possibility' it is unlimited and whatever is unlimited is beyond human comprehension. Here, too, Bloch's ideas

77. ʿAbdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 148.

78. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. III, p. 1199. Emphasis added.

79. *Ibid.*, p. 1295.

harmonize with the Bahá'í Writings. `Abdu'l-Bahá characterizes God in a similar way when he writes:

The very fact that the reality of phenomena is limited well indicates that there must needs be an unlimited reality, for were there no unlimited, or infinite, reality in life, the finite being of objects would be inconceivable.⁸⁰

The concept of God as an unlimited “real Possible” is also compatible with the Bahá'í position that God is omnipotent and absolutely unconstrained since there is no limit to the possible. In other words, Bloch's concept of the “real Possible” goes a long way towards reviving many of the traditional descriptors of God. The “real Possible” is omnipresent, or as Bahá'u'lláh says, “No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it.”⁸¹ He is omniscient – since it is difficult to conceive how a being that can be everywhere cannot know everything. It is free from time i.e. eternal because it does not exist on the phenomenal plane like other particular beings. Finally, it has unity and “singleness”⁸² because there cannot be more than one unlimited “real Possible.” In short, Bloch seems to have re-invented God by a new name, the “real Possible.”

Of course, this concept of God as we have discussed it belongs to what is commonly called “the God of the philosophers”⁸³ as distinct from the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.”⁸⁴ The former is more akin to an idea, a necessary ontological concept, whereas the latter is a Someone with Whom we can have a personal relationship, i.e., Who calls for a personal response from us. Bloch's philosophy has little or no room for such a God and, therefore, must always remain incomplete from a theological point-of-view.

The subject of God raises another problem insofar as it highlights the issue of ‘transcendence.’ In the Bahá'í Writings God transcends His creation, because, among other things, He is absolutely independent and everything else is absolutely dependent on Him. Bloch's problem is that his understanding of ‘transcendence’ brings him closer to the spiritual or philosophical idealist position than to materialism. We have already seen this in his view of potentials as real but not susceptible to scientific analysis, and then in the idea that there is a “metaphysical correlate” of

80. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 424.

81. Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 178.

82. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 114.

83. Blaise Pascal. <http://www.users.csbsju.edu/~eknuth/pascal.html> .

84. *Ibid.*

the projected God, who is described as a “real Possible.” It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that his materialism is severely compromised.

The philosophy of human nature

As we have seen, for Bloch, all beings, including human beings, are a becoming towards the Not-Yet, i.e., towards the future that will develop from the real possibilities inherent in any situation. Thus, for Bloch, human individuals and human history are “a repository of possibilities that are living options for future action.”⁸⁵ These “living options” are what Bloch calls the “fact-based Possible”⁸⁶ which, speaking generally, can be known by rationally studying the components of reality and “their factual relations.”⁸⁷ By observing these components we can deduce some of the inherent possibilities or potentials for the future. These potentials then become the focus of our future-oriented actions.

Because we are evolving beings in an evolving universe, hope is one of the most prominent features of our existence, yet, paradoxically, until Bloch, it was one of the topics least studied by philosophers. Previously, hope had been studied by theologians, who saw it as a subjective response to our external situation and/or our inner spiritual condition. However, Bloch sees it as something more:

Expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become; this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but correctly corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole.⁸⁸

Hope, the teleological forward orientation towards a goal is an objectively, ontologically real aspect of nature, and this aspect of reality manifests itself among humans as ‘hope’ which helps to constitute human consciousness. In other words, hope is more than a subjective response. Hope also has a cognitive function: it allows us to see the real possibilities latent in the world around us, thus orienting present thought and action in light of the future. Consequently, hope and the future shape both the present world and the individuals living in it.⁸⁹ In this sense, the future is present right now.

85. Douglas Kellner, *Ernst Bloch, Utopia and Ideology Critique*. <http://www.uta.edu/huma/illuminations/kell1.htm>

86. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 229.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 229.

88. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 134.

Consequently, living authentically, being an authentic human being requires us to understand ourselves as living in hope,⁹⁰ which is, in effect, living with an endless, structurally given hunger.⁹¹ Such hunger is one of the major constitutive features of human existence; it is an “enlightened hunger,”⁹² which preserves the self not only by rebelling against external and internal strictures on authenticity but also by “self-extension,”⁹³ i.e., by actualizing new possibilities in the world and in itself. At the very foundation of human nature is a drive to “fill a hollow space in the striving and longing, to fill something lacking with an external something.”⁹⁴ In other words, as `Abdu'l-Bahá says, humankind is intrinsically “restless and dissatisfied,”⁹⁵ always seeking something more. In a similar vein, Bahá'u'lláh writes that “All men have been created to carry forward an *ever-advancing* civilization,”⁹⁶ a statement demonstrating the never ceasing future-oriented impulse that constitutes human nature. Such a future orientation inherently contains a hunger, a dissatisfaction or yearning for something better.

This kind of hunger and the resulting hope is often disguised as day-dreams at the personal level, and as religious and/or mythical visions of ‘heaven,’ paradise, the Golden Age, the golden islands of the Hesperides or even Valhalla. In these visions or dreams, the best possibilities within reality or ourselves are actualized. Whether these visions are portrayed as future states or as memories of a perfect past is less important than the fact that in them we observe “a pre-appearance of the possible Real.”⁹⁷ Rather than flights from reality, they are a glimmering awareness of the real possibilities within the world and us. Bloch calls our dim awareness of the utopian elements a “Not Yet Conscious”⁹⁸ which only sometimes develops into full “anticipatory consciousness”⁹⁹ informing our thoughts and actions. When this occurs, we leave behind the myths and begin to develop plans and even visions for the future, both as individuals and societies; we begin to write constitutions or utopian books and to institute reforms aimed at dignifying peoples’ lives. All these activities are products of the “anticipatory consciousness” which is an essential aspect of the human mind.

90. *Ibid.*, p. 146.

91. Ernst Bloch, *The Spirit of Utopia*, p. 196.

92. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 76.

93. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

94. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

95. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 184.

96. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 215. Emphasis added.

97. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. I, p. 97.

98. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

99. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Let us pause for a moment to consider whether Bloch's views on human nature harmonize with the Bahá'í Writings. We have already noted that the Writings endorse the view that all created things, including human beings, are in the process of actualizing their latent potentials, i.e., their "real possibilities" to use Bloch's terminology. For example, `Abdu'l-Bahá says, "There is brotherhood potential in humanity because all inhabit this earthly globe under the one canopy of heaven."¹⁰⁰ This assertion illustrates what Bloch means by a real possibility. The potential for global harmony, is not based on mere wish or fantasy, but on empirically verifiable facts about our habitation on the same planet and the actualization of all the hidden potentials of that fact.

However, a question remains. Do the Writings have anything that corresponds to Bloch's concept of hunger? The answer is found in one of Bahá'u'lláh's prayers. He refers to God as "my Desire and the Desire of all things."¹⁰¹ If God is our desire, then it follows that we have a hunger for God. Furthermore, if we have a genuine hunger for God and wish to draw near to Him, then we will do what God wishes us to do which is to actualize our various intellectual, social and above all spiritual potentials. Thus, while our 'primary' hunger is for God, our 'mediate' hunger is for the potentials that lie within us. This idea is re-enforced in the same prayer where we read, "my Aim and the Aim of all things." A moment's reflection helps us realize that an 'aim' is something for which we hunger – why else would we aim for something? – and since we hunger or aim for God, we also implicitly hunger for that which God desires for us, i.e., the actualization of our infinite potentials.¹⁰²

Another convergence between the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch is the emphasis on both contemplation or reflection and action. `Abdu'l-Bahá says that "faith compriseth both knowledge and the performance of good deeds."¹⁰³ This makes it clear that "conscious knowledge" is not only for reflection and mediation, important as these are, but is also intended as a basis for action. Knowledge and action are correlates, and each is deficient without the other: actionless knowledge and ignorant action benefit no one. Bloch refers to "theory-practice"¹⁰⁴ in which he rejects static contemplation or theory as incomplete and asserts the "theoretical-practical primacy of true philosophy."¹⁰⁵ In other words, philosophy or,

100. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 129.

101. Baha'u'llah, *Prayers and Meditations by Baha'u'llah*, p. 58.

102. `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel* (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>), p. 17.

103. The Universal House of Justice, 1996, Oct. 22, *Authentication and Authority*. (Ocean: <http://www.bahai-education.org/ocean/>).

104. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, p. 246.

105. *Ibid.*, p. 280.

more generally, knowledge or cognition, should not be isolated from action.

In my view, Bloch's views on these matters harmonize well with the Bahá'í Writings though we must 'read through' a language more akin to Hegel, Marx and Heidegger than to the Writings. For example, the dim "Not-Yet-Consciousness" or sense of deeper and better potentials available in ourselves and in reality leaves humans inherently restless and unsatisfied in their quest for further development. This portrayal of human nature complements 'Abdu'l-Bahá's description of human beings as intrinsically "restless and dissatisfied."¹⁰⁶ Bloch also sees human nature as inherently restless, always seeking new possibilities in our inner and outer environment, and consequently, always anticipating future events. This "Not-Yet-Consciousness" i.e., "anticipatory consciousness" which makes us dissatisfied with the status quo, encourages our independent investigation of truth, an attitude of detachment from everything except the truth¹⁰⁷ and an attitude of willingness to accept new truths or new explanations of truths. It must be emphasized that the truth about things for Bloch and the Writings is not simply what a thing is but also includes currently the real possibilities latent in any thing or situation. This is the all-important aspect of reality and we must never let it out of our sight because without it, the grounds for real, rational hope vanish and we will only get a distorted understanding of reality.

The convergence between the Writings and Bloch on the issue of the human soul is tenuous because the concept of a soul is undeveloped in Bloch's work. Strictly speaking, given his supposed materialism there should be no convergence on this topic at all because the Bahá'í concept of the soul involves its transcendence to the body and matter in general.¹⁰⁸ However, as already observed, Bloch's materialism is highly suspect not only vis-à-vis the ontological existence of potentials, but also vis-à-vis God's existence as "the metaphysical correlate of this projection [of God] remains the hidden, the still undefined-undefinitive, the real Possible in the sense of mystery."¹⁰⁹ Could the personal soul also be a "real Possible" that transcends the material world? Could there also be a hidden "metaphysical correlate" of the projection of the soul? Bahá'u'lláh seems to support this view insofar as He tells us that the soul is a mystery beyond all our particular understandings of it.

106. Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 184.

107. Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 38.

108. *Ibid.*, p. 239.

109. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. III, p. 1199.

Thou hast asked Me concerning the nature of the soul. Know, verily, that the soul is a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel.¹¹⁰

At this point it is clear that Bloch's philosophy on the subject of the soul is sufficiently ambiguous to be open to different, even contradictory, interpretations. No definitive answer is possible either way and the best that we can do is note that on the subject of the soul, there is a possible convergence.

Bloch's *Principle of Hope* also provides the study of human nature with a universally applicable method of analyzing humanity's cultural products in a positive manner. Because "utopia is always latent in every cultural product,"¹¹¹ we can analyze myth, art, music, literature, film and theater to look for the "cultural or utopian surplus," i.e., for those universal qualities such as a sense of dignity, meaning, freedom, and security, which inform human striving for the future. In this way, Bloch presents himself as the "redemptive reader"¹¹² who saves what is essentially human from the mass of culture-bound particulars. As, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's story of Christ and the dead dog makes clear, Bahá'ís need not depend on Bloch's method to salvage the positive potentials among the signs of the decay of the old world order. This quest for the positive in all things is an integral part of the Bahá'í world-view with its emphasis on establishing a new, more inclusive and more constructive world order. However, by reading Bloch's commentaries especially on social developments and the arts, Bahá'ís may learn additional ways of identifying the constructive, forward-looking elements and potentials.

In Bloch's method of analysis, it is irrelevant whether the art is 'high' or low' ('pop') since traces of the "utopian surplus" can be found even in the 'low' or 'popular' arts. Art, or cultural productions in general, begins in current reality ("the Become") and then develops into more completely developed expressions of the future potentials inherent in reality.¹¹³ In other words, it begins in the contemporary '*Zeitgeist*' or 'spirit of the times' and then explicitly or implicitly shows us the way to future developments in society. For Bloch "*Art is a laboratory and also a feast*

110. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 158.

111. David Kaufmann, "Thanks for the Memory: Bloch, Benjamin and the Philosophy of History," in *Not Yet: Reconsidering Ernst Bloch* (New York: Verso, 1970), p. 37.

112. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

113. Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, vol. 1, p. 216.

of implemented possibilities."¹¹⁴ The 'implementation' refers to the imaginative extension of the "cultural or utopian surplus" into a completed work of art. The same principles can be applied to cultural analysis.

The foregoing similarities notwithstanding, there is one significant difference between Bloch's and the Bahá'í Writings' philosophy of human nature: transcendence. According to the Writings human beings have both an animal and spiritual nature; because it transcends the animal nature, the spiritual nature, the soul, is able to control our lower proclivities as it strives towards God by trying to actualize its spiritual potentials. In other words, human lives are not entirely immanent in the natural, material world; even when we die, we pass into a transcendent spiritual realm where our evolution continues. Bloch's views on this issue, as we have seen above, are ambivalent, amenable to interpretations that both support and deny the existence of a 'transcendent' aspect of human nature.

Conclusion

Two main conclusions can be drawn from this survey comparison of the Bahá'í Writings and Ernst Bloch. The first is that they share significant similarities and/or convergences in their fundamental ontology, their belief in the importance of religion, and their understanding of human nature. Consequently, further investigation into this subject is worthwhile since this study is only an initial reconnaissance. Further studies have an intrinsic value for those interested in learning in what ways and to what degree the Bahá'í Writings relate and speak to the concepts advanced by the various leaders of thought in the time for which the Writings were revealed.

Secondly, we conclude that further investigation into correlating the Bahá'í Writings and Bloch is important because doing so opens the door to dialogue with such highly influential Christian theologians as Jurgen Moltmann. His widely-read *Theology of Hope* which is explicitly based on Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*, sparked the "theology of hope" movement in contemporary Christianity. Knowledge of Bloch is also useful in Bahá'í teaching work among people from a left-wing background. Bloch's language and references are already familiar and meaningful to them and this makes it easier for them to follow his arguments, especially when these lead into the direction of the Faith. The differences with Bloch's philosophy and his application of it in the world

114. *Ibid.*, p. 216.

of politics should not blind us to what is valuable and useable in it. Let us recall `Abdu'l-Bahá and the dead dog.

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