

CONFERENCE REPORTS

IAN KLUGE (Abbotsford, B.C., Canada)

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Interest in studying the Bahá'í Writings from a philosophical perspective continues to grow among attendees of the annual Bahá'í Studies Conference. Four presenters shared their findings with audiences that were at or near room capacity and who provided lively debate in the question and answer segment ending each session. Indeed, a lot of discussions carried over into the breaks. I am pleased to share with you my understandings of these fine presentations.

There are four main reasons for studying the Bahá'í Writings from a philosophical perspective. The first is to understand the Writings themselves because they not only contain numerous explicitly philosophical passages and arguments but also implicitly contain philosophical ideas and arguments embedded in images, analogies anecdotes and examples. The second reason is based on the first, namely, to improve our ability to explain and/or teach the Faith to others in a clear, coherent and rational manner. This is a *sine qua non* for all effective teaching whether it is of a religious nature or not. Third, a philosophical understanding of the Bahá'í Writings aids in apologetics, i.e. in defending the Bahá'í teachings with rational counter-arguments to critiques of the Writings. Finally, understanding the Writings philosophically enables us to carry on in-depth discussions and explorations with other religions which also have well-developed philosophical traditions. Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism come readily to mind. Our discussions will no longer be confined to the surface appearances of various faiths.

Presentation 1

Kevin Naimi: *Thinking Sociologically About Independent Investigation*

Kevin Naimi is a P.hD student in the sociology of education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. His research focuses on student engagement and meaningful inquiry (independent investigation) in schools.

In this paper, Kevin Naimi explored how the concept of situated agency affects our understanding of ourselves and consequently our understanding of the Bahá'í principle of the independent search for truth. This principle is one of the foundation stones of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. The concept of situated agency points out that all human thought, feeling and action – whether at the personal or social level – is shaped by our 'situation' which includes culture, social class, language, educational level, nation, personal and collective history, traditions and so on. We are embedded in these 'situations' and, according to the concept of situated agency, cannot ever remove ourselves their power, though we can, of course, go from one kind of situation to another. It is possible to move from a lower socio-economic bracket to a higher one, to improve one's education and to absorb more of our own or even different cultures. What we cannot escape is that our thoughts, feelings and actions are irrevocably concretely 'situated.'

According to Kevin Naimi, our conditioned nature has an important impact on our understanding of Bahá'u'lláh's principle of the independent investigation of truth. This is because our conditioned or situated nature profoundly affects our understanding of ourselves. We can no longer accept our common-sense self-understanding of ourselves as absolutely self-sufficient independent beings, or what some philosophers have called 'social atoms.' The truth is, we are connected to and influenced by society both consciously and unconsciously. Therefore, we cannot always be sure of the full ownership of a thought, an attitude, a feeling or an action. In other words, Bahá'ís must learn to understand themselves as a part of the social web in which we all find ourselves. This, in turn, leads us to a better understanding of the connection between personal and social transformation. We are not merely passive parts of the social web but can transform the web itself by transforming ourselves with the guidance of Bahá'u'lláh. In this way, the subtle influences of His teachings will be felt, unconsciously perhaps at this time, but felt nonetheless.

Kevin Naimi makes it clear that the most effective way to engage in the independent investigation of truth requires us to understand how our thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions are connected to our society, indeed, to our whole situation. Only then can we gain some detachment from these connections by factoring them into our thinking. The Bahá'í Writings draw our attention to this in their call for detachment from our ties to the world in the quest for knowledge and truth. For example, Bahá'u'lláh says, "Arise in the name of Him Who is the Object of all knowledge, and, with absolute detachment from the learning of men lift

up your voices.”¹ In other words, we must know the dependencies in our thinking, and how they subtly encourage our thoughts in one direction or another. Without knowing such things consciously, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to gain a more *accurate* view of the truth. Of course, the concept of situated agency suggests that such conscious knowledge is never complete and, therefore, genuine objective knowledge is impossible. The Bahá'í principle of consultation is designed to help overcome this challenge by removing the sense of ownership and with it, feelings of defensiveness, from the exchange of ideas in the quest for truth.

Presentation 2

Ian Kluge: *Procrustes' Bed: The Insufficiencies of Secular Humanism*

Ian Kluge is a poet, playwright and independent philosophy scholar from Abbotsford, B.C. He has published numerous articles comparing the Bahá'í Writings with other belief systems and philosophies. These include Aristotle, Buddhism, Whitehead, Heidegger and Postmodernism.

Ian Kluge's basic argument is that secular humanism – defined as an exclusively human-centered and non-theist philosophy – has four main insufficiencies which undermine its claim to have an adequate understanding of human nature and to be a sufficient guide for ethical action.

The first problem is secular humanism's (SH) application of the amputating function of Procrustes' Bed to the empirically, i.e., scientifically established fact that religion, religious beliefs, or an orientation to Transcendence are a universal feature of human existence. No culture without religion has ever been discovered and even phenomena like political ideologies share the orientation to Transcendence, i.e., an inclination to look to something that is (1) not limited by time and space as all other things are and (2) is not dependent on anything else for its existence. Marx's dialectical materialism is one example of this orientation to Transcendence. By amputating an essential attribute of human nature, SH undermines its claims to have a scientific and empirical theory of human nature.

Second: having amputated humanity's orientation to Transcendence, SH also cuts off the important benefits of this orientation. SH forces us to understand ourselves as purely physical beings bereft of intrinsic value. A divine Creator bestows value on us – value that is intrinsic because it cannot be taken away. As Bahá'u'lláh says:

Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and

1. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), XXXV, p. 84.

names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light.²

SH's understanding of human nature leaves no room for the existence of a soul, free will, life after death or even objective morals. A consciousness informed by the knowledge that it has no intrinsic value and that whatever value it has is a mere social convention or material processes is substantially different than a consciousness informed of by a sense of intrinsic value based on a Transcendent entity, or by the will of God.

The third problem is that SH cannot provide an objective moral code strictly on the basis of its own intellectual resources. As Hume's well-known argument makes clear, we cannot get from a description of facts to a prescription for behavior, which reduces all purely empirical resources. While religions may disagree about ethics – although the number of similarities is astounding – they can, at least in principle, achieve an objective ethics by reference to God. This internal coherence strengthens their arguments about ethics. Nor can SH adequately answer the following questions: (1) Who or what has the knowledge of reality as a whole and human nature in particular to decide the appropriateness of ethical precepts? (2) Who or what has the universal knowledge, and the understanding of humanity to legitimize demands for obedience?

The fourth problem concerns the stretching functions of Procrustes' Bed. Some SH writers like Alain de Botton³ understand that secular humanism alone robs us of many important experiences and feelings that religion provides. Despite his good will, it is not clear how a "Temple of Tenderness"⁴ dedicated to pictures of the Virgin Mary can replace the religious experience of reverence for the 'mother of God' as a metaphysical concept. De Botton's efforts to stretch a psychological state into a metaphysical belief is ineffective.

Presentation 3:

Mikhail Sergeev: *The Bahá'í Faith and Modernity: A Comparative Analysis*

Mikhail Sergeev holds his doctorate in religious studies from Temple University. He teaches history of religion, philosophy and modern art at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Mikhail Sergeev's presentation examined the relationship between the principles and doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith and the eighteenth century

2. *Ibid.*, XC, p. 177.

3. Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 176.

Enlightenment, or, what some call modernity. He finds that the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith converge to a significant degree with the ideology of the Enlightenment which they re-affirm albeit in a different religious context. For example, both the Enlightenment and the Bahá'í Writings make the application of reason – even to religion – a major principle. Furthermore, both extoll the principle of free investigation of truth including religious truth; free expression of personal viewpoints on all subjects; freedom of conscience in regards to religious beliefs; freedom of association; the rule of law as the basis of an orderly society in which all may flourish, and the equality of men and women. The Bahá'í Faith and the Enlightenment also converge in regards to their belief in individual and collective or social progress; the importance of scientific and technological advancement and in the principle of fundamental and irrevocable human rights unfettered by any considerations of race, culture, socio-economic status, nationality or religion. On the practical side, these doctrines are combined with an Administrative Order that clearly distinguishes between and separates administrative institutions which manage and legislate action (on the basis of the Writings) and personal interpretation of the Writings (a free right for all) and worship. Combine these traits with the absence of clergy and free elections at the local, national and international level and it is not difficult to see why the Bahá'í Faith provides unique attractions among the world's religions.

However, the Bahá'í Faith cannot simply be categorized as a phenomenon of modernity or the Enlightenment. It is not merely a part of the story of modernity but neither is it a part of contemporary postmodernism which is characterized by a deep epistemological scepticism, by ethical and cultural relativism and an abiding predilection for destabilizing any and all knowledge structures for the sake of destabilization which it regards as salutary. Nonetheless, the Bahá'í Faith is postmodern – but in a unique way insofar as Dr. Sergeev views it as employing Enlightenment ideas as a launching pad from which to begin developing its own interpretations and applications of Enlightenment thought. In other words, the Bahá'í Faith makes positive use of and incorporates modern, Enlightenment principles in order to supersede them.

According to Dr. Sergeev, the Bahá'í Faith progresses beyond the Enlightenment ideology insofar as it includes human spirituality and thereby displays a spiritual depth that is lacking in the dogmatic rationalism of the Enlightenment. This dogmatic rationalism limits the Enlightenment's vision of progress to external social reforms which completely ignores the hidden dimensions of human nature and finds no place for social reform by individual spiritual transformation. Furthermore, the Bahá'í confirmation of many Enlightenment principles gives these principles a more solid

foundation in human nature, i.e., in human needs and in the human psyche. Human beings are not only logic-chopping machines but also have hearts and souls that need to be satisfied. Finally, the Bahá'í system is able to adapt the application of its principles and doctrines to the various levels of social and cultural, economic and political development found in the variety of nations found on earth. In this way the Bahá'í practice of Enlightenment ideas as developed through Bahá'í principles and doctrines is better able to serve humankind.

Presentation 4

Jay Howden: *The Unconscious Civilization, The Great Awakening and John Ralston Saul*

Jay Howden is a writer and educator. He has spent the past five years teaching and learning in Dalian, China, with his wife and the youngest of his four sons. He has been searching for the Bahá'í way since his teens. His writing can be sampled at JamesHowden.com.

The primary purpose of Jay Howden's presentation was to encourage Bahá'ís to explore the work of John Ralston Saul in regards to the principles and doctrines of the Bahá'í Writings. He is a like-minded thinker from whom Bahá'ís can learn a great deal. Saul, who is not only a writer but social activist has written two books of particular interest to Bahá'ís – *The Unconscious Civilization* and *On Equilibrium*. Howden admits that Saul diverges from the Bahá'í Writings at times but contends that the convergences are of important and far-reaching consequences.

The Unconscious Civilization is an in-depth critique of Western culture and its attempts to construct a world order almost entirely on the basis of market-place principles. The resulting mass society with its mass communication systems has led to a diminishment and disempowerment of the individual as the interests of corporatist special interest groups exert undue power in all aspects of life. Individualism declines into conformity which manifests itself in a weakness for total theories (like Marxism, Fascism, Nationalism or Neo-conservatism) that purport to simplify and explain everything for us. The pressure to conform inevitably clashes with the concept of democracy. Ironically, these 'totalizing developments' work to make us less conscious and not more conscious and, thereby, to divorce us from reality. From a Bahá'í perspective, these developments are problematic, not least because conformism discourages the independent investigation of truth mandated by Bahá'u'lláh as one of His main teachings, as well as asking questions. The Bahá'í Faith, after all, even has a Feast of Questions. Furthermore, these developments make us one-dimensional. They encourage the overdevelopment of humanity's physical or material nature, thereby devaluing other, non-material aspects

of life like ethics, culture, self-expression, or what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls our “spiritual susceptibilities.” They also enshrine injustice as the needs and rights of all individuals are subjected to the over-riding forces of the national and international market. Howden also points out that Saul denies the contemporary dogma that democracy depends on a free market economy, i.e., a market of countless individuals making their own choices for their own well-being.

On Equilibrium embodies one of Bahá’u’lláh’s most important teachings, namely, the need for moderation in all things. Bahá’u’lláh, after all, states that even civilization and freedom, if carried to excess, will lead us astray. According to Saul, humanism at its best is a dynamic equilibrium of six factors: (1) common sense; (2) ethics; (3) imagination; (4) intuition; (5) memory and (6) reason. When one factor unduly dominates the others, the whole ‘system’ falls into disequilibrium and problems arise, one of which is that the over-emphasis of one leads to a narrow world-view, or, what Saul calls “ideologies.” These undermine the ability to think and act intelligently because we are no longer perceiving, thinking or acting as whole beings. To regain equilibrium we must understand these “ideologies” and bring them under our control.

Coordinator of the Philosophy SIG