

# In Pursuit of Harmony between Science and Religion

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## *Abstract*

The disintegration of the old world order is accelerating, driven by religious fanaticism, irreligion, and an inability to achieve sufficient consensus of thought and action to systematically address the ills afflicting humanity. The capacity to unite in the investigation of truth for the advancement of civilization requires the harmony of science and religion, in which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, science is freed from materialism and religion from superstition. This paper looks at how Bahá'ís might understand and increasingly contribute to the effectuation of this principle through action and involvement in contemporary discourse.

## *Resumé*

La désintégration de l'ancien ordre mondial s'accélère, sous l'impulsion du fanatisme religieux, de l'irreligion et d'une incapacité à établir un consensus de pensée et d'action suffisant pour enrayer de façon systématique les maux dont souffre l'humanité. Pour pouvoir s'unir dans une quête de vérité qui favorisera le progrès de la civilisation, il faut que la science et la religion soient en harmonie, ce qui – comme l'explique 'Abdu'l-Bahá – signifie que la science doit être exempte de matérialisme et la religion, de superstitions. L'auteur examine comment les bahá'ís pourraient

approfondir ce principe et contribuer à sa réalisation par des actions et une prise de parole dans le discours contemporain.

## *Resumen*

La desintegración del viejo orden mundial se está acelerando, fomentado por el fanatismo religioso, la irreligión, y una incapacidad de lograr suficiente consenso de pensamiento y acción para sistemáticamente atender los males afligiendo a la humanidad. La capacidad de unirse en la investigación de la verdad para el avance de la civilización requiere de la armonía entre la ciencia y la religión, en la cual, como 'Abdu'l-Bahá explica, la ciencia es liberada del materialismo y la religión de la superstición. Este ensayo reflexiona sobre cómo los bahá'ís pueden entender y contribuir cada vez más a la efectucción de este principio a través de la acción y la participación en el discurso contemporáneo.

When we look at the world around us, especially as reflected in news reports and social media, we increasingly see evidence everywhere that the understandings and structures of human society are frayed and unable to adequately address the pressing problems of humanity. Terrorism and fanaticism, oppression and war, prejudice and demagoguery, the aggregation of the vindication of extreme wealth and superficial response to poverty, the glorification of opinion over fact, the conflation of morality with personal preference, the advancement of a materialistic worldview, and the reduction of what it means to be human, assault our consciousness and our perception of reality every day. The evil

tendencies of corruption, moral laxity, and ingrained prejudice mentioned by Shoghi Effendi so long ago have vastly expanded their reach and impact. The hope for a world of peace and progress that shone briefly but brightly as the previous century drew to a close has been overtaken by a fog of disorientation and despair, rendering humanity unable or unwilling to agree on the nature of its problems and how to resolve them. As the Universal House of Justice explained, “in different nations in different ways, the social consensus around ideals that have traditionally united and bound together a people is increasingly worn and spent,” recalling “the unequivocal verdict from the Supreme Pen: ‘They hasten forward to Hell Fire, and mistake it for light’” (Ridván Message 2015).

The world we inhabit is the social reality that reflects our understanding and action; as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “[t]he reality of man is his thought” (*Paris Talks* 17). A sound social reality requires a sound grasp of reality, an outlook that should be facilitated by the knowledge systems of science and religion (Lample). Consider the nature of food systems as one example of the extreme irrationality that permeates the structure of global society. One might imagine a reasonable aim for such systems would be to provide all the world’s people with a sufficient and healthy diet produced by sustainable methods and efficient delivery systems in harmony with the ecosystem. What we witness, instead, is a bizarre arrangement centered on

control and extraction of wealth for a few at the expense of the masses; the prostitution of science in service to food engineering, which makes harmful products addictive and ushers in a self-inflicted health crisis; the perpetuation of hunger among more than ten percent of the world’s population, including some one hundred million children; and systems of production and distribution at war with the environment (Hanley).

Thus, human beings live in a social reality of their own creation, derived from a limited consciousness of reality, and the world we see around us is the result. If we want a different world, we must think and act differently. Distracted and nearsighted, humanity has unwittingly loosed the reins of reason and right conduct, allowing the steed of social order to deviate increasingly from the path of civilization. The consequence is an acceleration of the disintegration of the social order; facilitating the rolling out of a new order in its stead requires a tightening of the grip on these reins based on Bahá’u’lláh’s conception of the harmony of science and religion.

The relationship between science, or reason, and religion is widely and often hotly debated, and the elusive harmony on which civilization depends will not be suddenly manifested (Arbab). The purpose of this article is to explore how the harmony of science and religion might be realized. It is derived from aspects of a talk given in May 2016 in Wilmette, Illinois, and elaborates upon points that

were necessarily touched upon indirectly and very generally at that time. The thoughts presented here are, of course, the personal perspectives of one individual.

DIAGNOSIS OF THE FORCES  
AFFLICTING HUMANITY

In His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh offers an analysis of the forces afflicting society as it struggles to deal with the transition toward a stable global order. At the heart of this turmoil, He explains, is the decline of religion. Religion, He writes, “is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world,” and He warns that “[s]hould the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine” (*Tablets* 125). As the light of true religion dims—that is, religious thought and practice consistent with the original teachings set forth by the Manifestation of God—two virulent forces intensify. One is religious fanaticism, which Bahá'u'lláh likens to “a world-devouring fire, whose violence none can quench” (*Gleanings* 288). The second is the “corrosion of ungodliness” that is “eating into the vitals of human society” (200). In both instances, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the antidote to these destructive forces is true religion, and He calls upon the leaders of the world to safeguard religion and rehabilitate society:

The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. Suffer it not to become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity. This is the straight Path, the fixed and immovable foundation. Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure. Our hope is that the world's religious leaders and the rulers thereof will unitedly arise for the reformation of this age and the rehabilitation of its fortunes. (*Gleanings* 215–16)

In His analysis these concepts, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “The greatest cause of human alienation has been religion because each party has considered the belief of the other as anathema and deprived of the mercy of God.” The purpose of religion is to contribute to the advancement of civilization and the wellbeing of humanity. Over the centuries, however, the practice of religion departs from the essential truths of its sacred scriptures. Eventually, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, “each system of religious belief has boasted of its own superiority and excellence, abasing and scorning the validity of all others.” Leaders of religion, He adds, come

to consider “the world of humanity as two trees: one divine and merciful, the other satanic; they themselves the branches, leaves and fruit of the divine tree and all others who differ from them in belief the product of the tree which is satanic. Therefore, sedition and warfare, bloodshed and strife have been continuous among them” (*Promulgation* 230).

When the teachings of religion are distorted in this way, religions depart from what is true, what is good, and what is right, to become the imposition of ideology and the exercise of power over others. They degenerate into superstition and lose the meaning originally conveyed by their Founders, the Manifestations of God. And when religious leaders associate superstitious concepts with religion, it is no wonder that rational and scientific minds consider religion to be superstition. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observes:

True religion is the source of love and agreement amongst men, the cause of the development of praiseworthy qualities, but the people are holding to the counterfeit and imitation, negligent of the reality which unifies, so they are bereft and deprived of the radiance of religion. . . . That which was meant to be conducive to life has become the cause of death; that which should have been an evidence of knowledge is now a proof of ignorance; that which was a factor in the sublimity of human nature has proved to be

its degradation. Therefore, the realm of the religionist has gradually narrowed and darkened, and the sphere of the materialist has widened and advanced; for the religionist has held to imitation and counterfeit, neglecting and discarding holiness and the sacred reality of religion. (*Promulgation* 179)

In the clash between religious fanaticism and a materialistic worldview that rejects religion, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá unhesitatingly sides with materialists. He observes that if religion “is made the cause of darkness through human misunderstanding and ignorance, it would be better to do without it” (*Promulgation* 287). But of course, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also finds a mere materialistic perspective of reality to be inadequate and the source of deep problems in itself, and calls upon us to rekindle the light of religion. He explains: “All the Prophets have come to promote divine bestowals, to found the spiritual civilization and teach the principles of morality. Therefore, we must strive with all our powers so that spiritual influences may gain the victory” (12). It is the harmony of science and religion that must guide human progress:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man’s intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a

man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism. (*Paris Talks* 143)

At the heart of forces driving the disequilibrium of the world, then, is a discordant relationship between science and religion, where science is too often constrained or interpreted by materialism, and religion is pervaded by superstition. Bahá'u'lláh calls for the harmony of science and religion so that human beings can grasp reality as accurately as possible and act effectively to change society for the better. And Shoghi Effendi anticipates a future in which “science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop” (*World Order* 204). The quest to gradually understand and act in a manner that upholds the relationship between science and religion is essential for transforming social reality. It requires a progressive effort to expose and disassociate science from its materialistic interpretation and religion from its superstitious entanglements.

#### A MATERIALISTIC PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

One of the most significant obstacles to an appreciation of the harmony

between science and religion is the way in which, in the modern world, scientific thought has become undifferentiated from the reductionistic, materialistic philosophical perspective that interprets its findings. Propelled especially by scientific advances and the explanatory power of evolutionary theory, materialistic philosophy proposes that everything about the existence of the universe can be reduced to matter and be known in terms of physics and chemistry, and, perhaps, biology. This does not mean that science simply confines itself to questions of the material realm, or that scientific findings might well be interpreted in a manner consistent with a religious conception of reality without resorting to awkward impositions of religion on science—such as the theory of intelligent design. Rather, science and its materialistic philosophical interpretation have become inseparable, predetermining ideologically that no reality exists outside the material, and that all phenomena, including consciousness and mental capacity, can be reduced to material interactions. As set forth in one text on science and religion:

Materialism is a philosophical system that regards matter as the only reality in the world. It attempts to explain every event in the universe as resulting from the conditions and activity of matter, and thus denies the existence of God and the immaterial soul. . . .

Materialism is a set of related theories that holds that all entities

and processes are composed of—and so are reducible to—matter, material forces, or physical processes. All events and facts are explainable, actually or in principle, in terms of body, material objects, or changes or movements. In general, the metaphysical theory of materialism entails the denial of the reality of spiritual beings, consciousness, and mental or psychic states or processes, as ontologically distinct from or independent of material changes or processes. (Campbell and Looy 139)

A materialistic philosophical interpretation of the findings of science pertaining to cosmology and evolution has fueled the neo-atheist movement to attack religion in a host of books and public debates. From this perspective, science, conceived to be inseparable from materialistic interpretations, is set in opposition to a conception of religion imbued with superstitious and anti-scientific notions. This stance, in turn, is contested by a range of other views, some thoughtful and some dogmatic, on the relationship between science and religion. What is perhaps more significant than these points of debate, however, is the extent to which, for many, religious ideas are simply irrelevant to an understanding of the world, which is to be understood solely in terms of basic physical laws and forces. Such a reductionist materialistic perspective, rather than simply being adopted as a methodological

tool for investigating physical reality through scientific inquiry, is assumed from the outset to be the only way to view reality as a whole.

Among some contemporary conclusions drawn from a materialist perspective on reality are the following:

- That human beings are insignificant, a mere speck in an arbitrary part of universe.
- That science is the only way to know; what it cannot know is not real.
- That human life is an accident of evolution and that if the process were to be repeated indefinitely, intelligent human life would not appear; the concept of a multiverse is used to try to rationalize how this accident of consciousness appeared once among countless universes.
- That human beings are no more than animals.
- That there is no possibility of life after death, since the person ends when the body ends.
- That if you are intelligent, you cannot be religious.
- That belief in God is a dangerous delusion, an intractable form of superstition that has caused inestimable harm, and that humanity must dispense with religion.
- That humans are chemical scum on a moderate-sized planet.
- That consciousness is not real; it is an artifact or illusion of the brain.



- That there is no purpose or meaning to the universe and that people are therefore obliged to make up their own meanings.

While the majority of the world's people do not hold such views, they are presumed to be obvious to many, and are propagated as a clear-eyed embrace of the reality of the universe. Yet the potential implications of such conclusions for social reality are inadequately considered. If what happens from the perspective of physics is only the result of forces associated with matter or space-time, and from the perspective of biology what is desirable is only that which survives and reproduces, then it is not merely God that is a delusion, but also social reality—which becomes disassociated from truth and meaning. Are life and civilization effectively nothing more than the way we amuse ourselves while our genes reproduce? Are we trapped in an endless struggle for existence and dominance? And is there no cause for concern if we make a mess of it and precipitate our own extinction—for the universe goes on?

In the past, when materialistic perspectives and their implications were weighed by philosophers, thinkers such as Nietzsche and Camus recognized the stark crisis that befell a humanity deprived of the shared purpose upon which the very delicate fabric of society depends. Today, the radical implications inherent in such a posture appear to be unappreciated or naively embraced as opportunity.

Biologist Edward O. Wilson concludes that in a universe bereft of meaning, human beings should simply create their own. He calls for an embrace of science and the humanities that will lead to a new Enlightenment and cooperation among a humanity that embraces its material reality and, somehow, successfully navigates its future place on the planet (*Meaning of Human Existence*). But there is no reason to expect or even hope for such an outcome. If social ideas are merely “memes” that compete in a Darwinian manner for acceptance and survival among human cultures, there is nothing but sophistry in advocating the superiority of rational materialism over, say, religious fanaticism, while plenty of evidence suggests that fanatics will reproduce and win out. The battle of ideologies throughout the twentieth century and into the start of the twenty-first is sufficient evidence. And, indeed, from such a perspective there is no justifiable way to say that one outcome matters more than any other. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá notes: “Progress and barbarism go hand in hand, unless material civilization be confirmed by Divine Guidance” (*Selections* 284).

It is evident that even science can become the victim of forces unleashed by a material worldview, serving as a tool wielded by those who hold wealth and power. Thus, to cite only a few examples, science is used to cover up the ill effects of sugar for the sugar industry and of smoking for the tobacco industry, to make unspeakable weapons of mass destruction for the

military-industrial complex, to produce medical breakthroughs that are reserved for the wealthiest on the planet, while ignoring the well-being of the masses, and is subject to the influence of social ills such as racial prejudice or the inequality of women and men.<sup>1</sup> Political forces, no less than fundamentalist religion, can be mobilized to obscure or deny sound scientific findings in the pursuit of sectarian interests. The harm inflicted by religious fanaticism can be opposed without advocating its replacement by an atheistic materialism that is no shield against an equal measure of abuse perpetuated in its name.

Along with loss of meaning and distortion of truth, a materialistic perspective on human nature undermines the basis for human morality. It is not that atheists cannot be moral. The more foundational question is why should an atheist—or anyone—be moral. And what is morality

1 Some might say that this characterization is not 'science' but the manipulation or hijacking of science by a few corrupt interests. Any fair-minded assessment, however, would readily demonstrate the distinction between an ideal conception of science and its obvious challenges in practice, especially the influence of money. My intent here is not to call science into question, but to expose the often unspoken assumption and simplistic generalization that science is good and religion is bad. As we stand on the threshold of engineering the human genome, for example, surely the use to which science is influenced by a materialistic, or any other, worldview is profoundly relevant.

anyway? The conviction that human beings must hold themselves accountable to particular values, principles or imperatives has been overtaken by a moral relativism that reduces morality to individual choices. Morality bends to personal preference, rather than personal behavior bending to morality. Although some argue that one is free to choose so long as another is not hurt, this limitation proves illusory in the face of evolving arguments that constantly challenge whether previously held beliefs are truly harmful to others. The consequent erosion of moral standards within a society proceeds gradually as clear and mutually agreed upon standards of an earlier period are called into question or set aside. This decline is evident, for example, in the change from the promotion of sexual abstinence before marriage to a belief that such restraint for young people is impossible, unnatural, or unwise; also in the change from the recognition of the importance of monogamy for the stability of the family—even if only held as an ideal—to arguments that monogamy is impossible. Even a practice widely held to be damaging such as pornography begins to find arguments in its favor, as in some examples from sex-positive feminism, among others. As philosopher Thomas Nagel observes, reducing humanity to a mere evolutionary byproduct undermines the basis for morality:

The evolutionary story leaves the authority of reason in a much weaker position. This is even more



clearly true of our moral and other normative capacities—on which we often rely to correct our instincts. . . . [A]n evolutionary self-understanding would almost certainly require us to give up moral realism—the natural conviction that our moral judgments are true or false independent of our beliefs. Evolutionary naturalism implies that we shouldn't take any of our convictions seriously, including the scientific world picture on which evolutionary naturalism depends. (*Mind and Cosmos* 26–27)

At the heart of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's critique of materialistic philosophy is precisely the way in which such reductionism uproots the essential definition of what it means to be human, for it imprisons humanity in an eternal struggle for existence—the survival of the fittest, the theory that lies at the heart of the evolutionary process governing biological creation. “This matter of the struggle for existence is the fountain-head of all calamities and is the supreme affliction,” He states (*Selections* 302). In His talks in the West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá observed that the people were “submerged and drowning in a sea of materialism” (*Promulgation* 16). Although material civilization advanced, spiritual civilization was left behind. He was astonished that individuals of great learning considered themselves to be no more than animals and disregarded human intelligence and distinction (17). It is in the human

being, not any other part of the earthly biosphere, that the universe exhibits consciousness of itself. The consequence of conceiving human beings to be merely animals and turning away from the uniquely human capacities, 'Abdu'l-Bahá concluded, is failure to attend to those things that would lift humanity beyond its imperfections such as jealousy, revenge, ferocity, hypocrisy, greed, injustice, tyranny, war, prejudice, self-interest and the struggle for power. In assessing the impact of such a perspective in the social realm, Shoghi Effendi warned against

crass materialism, which lays excessive and ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being forgetful of those things of the spirit on which alone a sure and stable foundation can be laid for human society. It is this same cancerous materialism, born originally in Europe, carried to excess in the North American continent, contaminating the Asiatic peoples and nations, spreading its ominous tentacles to the borders of Africa, and now invading its very heart, which Bahá'u'lláh in unequivocal and emphatic language denounced in His Writings, comparing it to a devouring flame and regarding it as the chief factor in precipitating the dire ordeals and world-shaking crises that must necessarily involve the burning of cities and the spread of terror and consternation in the hearts of men. (*Citadel* 125)

BEYOND A REDUCTIONISTIC  
PERSPECTIVE ON SCIENCE

There are philosophical alternatives to reductionism that do not compromise science and reason, which allows for broader possibilities in the investigation of reality. In *Mind and Cosmos: Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly Wrong*, Thomas Nagel asserts that “it is prima facie highly implausible that life as we know it is the result of a sequence of physical accidents together with the mechanism of natural selection” (5). In his view, materialism simply does not adequately explain the nature of consciousness, which is all too obviously part of the universe. He finds the reductive materialism underlying neo-Darwinian explanations of life and mind to be “antecedently unbelievable—a triumph of ideological theory over common sense” (122). Nagel asserts that its failure to adequately explain consciousness is a major obstacle to the materialist’s objective to provide a comprehensive physical description of the universe. The existence of consciousness, he states, implies that “the natural order is far less austere than it would be if physics and chemistry accounted for everything” (32). He argues:

The conflict between scientific naturalism and various forms of antireductionism is a staple of recent philosophy. On one side there is the hope that everything can be accounted for at the most basic

level by the physical sciences, extended to include biology. On the other side there are doubts about whether the reality of such features of our world as consciousness, intentionality, meaning, purpose, thought and value can be accommodated in a universe consisting of the most basic level only of physical facts—facts however sophisticated, of the kind revealed by the physical sciences. (*Mind and Cosmos* 12)

Nagel acknowledges that there must be a worldview which provides an explanation for the workings of the universe through biology, chemistry, and physics and their hierarchical relation, but he seeks a worldview whose acceptance or rejection would have no effect on the practice of these fields individually, such as we find in reductionism (*Mind and Cosmos* 3–4). While he frankly recognizes that a call to move beyond a purely material worldview opens possibilities for theistic explanations, he stops short of such a conclusion, looking instead for the territory between these perspectives. The purpose of his book, Nagel argues, is not to offer solutions, but rather to recognize the problem, since clinging to reductionistic material explanations, often out a fear of a revitalization of religious perspectives, is an obstacle to a more robust understanding of reality. He states: “The priority given to evolutionary naturalism in the face of its implausible conclusions about other subjects is

due, I think, to the secular consensus that this is the only form of external understanding of ourselves that provides an alternative to theism—which is to be rejected as a mere projection of our internal self-conception onto the universe, without evidence” (28). Rather than chance, creationism, or directionless physical law, Nagel instead leans toward a “natural teleology” or a “teleological bias,” a view that, in addition to physical laws of nature, there are other laws of nature that would account for consciousness and reason. Although consciousness and reason are irreducible parts of the natural order, they are not, in his view, due to an outside purposeful influence (90). He explains:

Since any adequate form of self-understanding would be an alternative to materialism, it would have to include mentalistic and rational elements of some kind. . . . A satisfying explanation would show that the realization of these possibilities was not vanishingly improbable but a significant likelihood given the laws of nature and the composition of the universe. It would reveal mind and reason as basic aspects of a nonmaterialistic natural order. (*Mind and Cosmos* 31–32)

Another challenge to the limiting perspective of reductionistic materialism comes from philosopher John Searle, who also finds a strictly materialistic understanding of consciousness to

be wanting. After reviewing a number of forms of materialism, he observes that each of them tries to exclude mental phenomena by demoting them to the physical or material realm. He writes: “Materialism seems obviously false: it ends up denying the existence of consciousness and thus denying the existence of the phenomenon that gives rise to the question in the first place” (47). And he concludes:

Materialists, after a lot of beating around the bush, do typically end up by denying the existence of consciousness, even though most of them are too embarrassed to come right out and say: “Consciousness does not exist. No human or animal has ever been conscious.” Instead, they redefine “consciousness” so that it no longer refers to inner, qualitative, subjective mental states but rather to some third-person phenomena, phenomena that are neither inner, qualitative, nor subjective in the senses I have explained. Consciousness is reduced to the behavior of the body, to computational states of the brain, information processing, or functional states of a physical system. Daniel Dennett is typical of materialists in this regard. Does consciousness exist for Dennett? He would never deny it. And what is it? Well, it is a certain bunch of computer programs implemented in the brain.

Such answers, I am afraid, will not do. Consciousness is an inner, subjective, first-person, qualitative phenomenon. Any account of consciousness that leaves out these features is not an account of consciousness but of something else. (Searle 50)

Despite the limitations he finds in a reductionistic materialism, however, Searle also strongly rejects any form of dualism of mind and body (47); he seeks an explanation within the bounds of nature—a “biological naturalism”—that can account for both.<sup>2</sup> He believes that consciousness, with all its subjectivity, is caused by processes within the brain and that conscious states are high-level features of the brain. Consciousness cannot be reduced to the brain’s lowest functions; it is not an illusion or mere artifact of electrical or chemical processes. On the contrary, such a materialistic approach is itself an obstacle to a better

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Nagel and Searle see the term “biological naturalism” differently. It is not possible here to reconcile the use of the terms reductionism, materialism, naturalism, and so on by the authors cited here. Each, however, offers a contrast between a restrictive and a more expansive philosophical perspective on reality. These are presented here in terms of the distinction between an atheistic, reductionistic, materialistic perspective that denies any reality beyond the material, and an agnostic, “soft” naturalism, open to broader possibilities.

understanding of reality. According to Searle:

Once we see that consciousness is a biological phenomenon like any other, then we can see that, of course, in some sense it is completely “material.” It is part of our biology. On the other hand, consciousness is not reducible to any process that consists of physical phenomena describable exclusively in third-person physical terms. Therefore, it looks like we have to reject materialism. The solution is not to deny any of the obvious facts, but to shift the categories around so we recognize that consciousness is at one and the same time completely material and irreducibly mental. And that means we should simply abandon the traditional categories of “material” and “mental” as they have been used in the Cartesian tradition. (69)

Interestingly, unlike Nagel, who reserves for others the possibility of a theistic approach for the explanation of mind and consciousness, Searle does not. But he does not argue against such a possibility so much as set it aside as irrelevant. Nobody bothers with such arguments, he explains, “and it is considered in slightly bad taste to even raise the question of God’s existence” (35). He continues:

What has happened? . . . I believe that something much more radical than a decline in religious faith

has taken place. For us, the educated members of society, the world has become demystified. Or rather, to put the point more precisely, we no longer take the mysteries we see in the world as expressions of supernatural meaning. . . . The result of this demystification is that we have gone beyond atheism to a point where the issue no longer matters in the way it did to earlier generations. For us, if it should turn out that God exists, that would have to be a fact of nature like any other. To the four basic forces in the universe—gravity, electromagnetism, weak and strong nuclear forces—we would add a fifth, the divine force. Or more likely, we would see the other forces as forms of the divine force. But it would still be all physics, albeit divine physics. If the supernatural existed, it too would have to be natural. (35)

Of course, the approaches taken by Nagel and Searle to address the question of human consciousness are very different from the Bahá'í perspective. Yet, their views, and those of others like them, are a critical step in separating science from the limiting orthodoxy of materialistic philosophy. By rejecting materialism, an obstacle to the investigation of reality is removed that allows humanity to see how far such an exploration can advance. It creates new possibilities for understanding the harmony of science and religion.

One question that often arises is whether the truth of religious beliefs can be weighed in the light of science. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has insisted that it can and, indeed, it must if religion is not to succumb to superstition (*Promulgation* 374).<sup>3</sup> However, this does not mean that religious beliefs must be weighed against materialistic philosophical interpretations of the findings of science. Here Searle's naturalism, as opposed to materialism, makes an important distinction. To the extent that science can explore reality, religion must be compatible with scientific findings. What we can know through science about that aspect of reality Bahá'ís consider to be spiritual reality would indeed, as Searle suggests, be "a fact of nature like any other."

Perhaps here it is important to note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not describe religion in terms of supernatural forces that are imperceptible and must, therefore, be accepted on the basis of blind faith. For Him, the "supernatural" begins where material reductionism ends: "All the powers and attributes of man are human and hereditary in origin—outcomes of nature's processes—except the intellect, which is supernatural" (*Foundations* 60). And in another instance:

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3 Of course, to weigh religious beliefs in the light of science does not mean to weigh the Revelation itself. For more detailed comments see my book, *Revelation and Social Reality: Learning to Translate What Is Written into Reality*, chapters 2 and 4.

“We have already stated that science or the attribute of scientific penetration is supernatural and that all other blessings of God are within the boundary of nature” (*Promulgation* 50). For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the ideal and distinctive faculties of human beings—the virtues and the powers of the mind, including the capacity for scientific acquisition—are properties of which nature is bereft, indicating that there must be more to the universe than can be understood by reductionistic materialism (*Promulgation* 80–81).

Thus, there is an appreciable overlap between a naturalistic perspective that goes beyond materialism to encompass consciousness and what can be known about the universe, on one hand and, on the other, the concept of the “supernatural” aspects of reality, as proposed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Science, freed from a reductionistic lens, can go far in exploring the expression of such potentialities. Yet, for Bahá'ís, science and reason alone cannot fully exhaust such possibilities; this is where religion is needed, to address and cultivate certain capacities with which the human being is endowed. In this sense, Bahá'u'lláh observes, “Even the materialists have testified in their writings to the wisdom of these divinely-appointed Messengers, and have regarded the references made by the Prophets to Paradise, to hell fire, to future reward and punishment, to have been actuated by a desire to educate and uplift the souls

of men” (*Gleanings* 158). But these, the true teachings of religion, are not religious beliefs encumbered by superstition.

#### SOME INSIGHTS FROM NATURALISTIC INQUIRY INTO RELIGION

The question of reductionism involves the perspective from which reality is viewed. From the subjective, first person perspective, as well as the intersubjective, second person perspective in which different individuals recognize one another and consider each other's subjective views, human beings contribute to the creation of a social reality of institutional facts and culture. Through science and reason, they strive for objectivity—a third person perspective seeking to know the world as it is—and this tempers the extremes of subjectivity while strengthening intersubjective understanding. But such striving in itself does not justify materialistic reductionism, which relegates personal consciousness and the subjective self to irrelevance and, thereby, creates the illusion of complete objectivity. Rather, it is in appreciating the relationship among the objective, the subjective, and the intersubjective viewpoints, and the way that together they create a reliable perspective for the sound evolution of social reality, that the limitations of a reductionistic materialist approach become apparent. An understanding of reality must adequately encompass the objective, the subjective, and the intersubjective.



Such concepts are explored by Jürgen Habermas (*Between Naturalism and Religion*) and Nagel (*The View from Nowhere* and *Equality and Partiality*), among others.

Similar to the way in which Nagel and Searle sought an alternative to reductionism, so Habermas, on the basis of anthropological findings, identifies what he calls a “methodologically grounded dualism in the form of a ‘soft’ naturalism” (166). He observes that attempting to translate ideas that can or should be addressed in terms of the working of the mind in exclusively empirical language directed toward things and events results in a loss of meaning. It is not possible to subsume the subjective into the objective. The materialistic reduction of the internal subjective dimension of the human mind to principles of physics and chemistry is a chimera. Only from a first-person subjective standpoint, engaged with other similar actors in social reality, are choice and human freedom evident, within, of course, the fixed parameters of objective reality.

Habermas notes that neurobiology cannot locate a center in the brain that coordinates everything and with which the subjective “I” can be correlated; yet while that “I” can be considered a social construction, it is not an illusion. “Clearly,” he writes, “the observer perspective, to which the empiricist perspective limits us, must be combined with that of participants in communicative and social practices in order to give socialized subjects like us cognitive access to the world” (68). He

adds: “The reciprocally interchangeable roles of the first, second and third person also facilitate the individuating embedding of the single organism in the public ‘space of reasons,’ where socialized individuals take stances on validity claims and can act deliberately, and thus freely, as the responsible authors of their own actions” (180).

Such a relationship among the objective, subjective, and intersubjective, Habermas concludes, creates the possibility of considering the contribution of religion and religious individuals to matters affecting the common good, without contradicting a naturalistic perspective. He thus rejects the exclusive third person perspective of reductionism or scientism, “the opposite pole to this rational reconstruction of the contents of faith,” which finds religious convictions to be “false, illusory, or meaningless per se” (244).

In identifying limitations of materialism, the intent of these philosophers is not to force science into a theistic worldview alien to its nature. It is to replace an ideological and narrow atheistic reductionism with what might be considered to be an agnostic naturalism that is open to all aspects of what exists, including consciousness, and can account for a reality that is more complex than the material. It is impossible, in this brief space, to provide an extensive overview of naturalism and religion. Yet, a few insights drawn from different fields suggest how, freed from the shackles of a dogmatic materialism, scientific findings give rise to a very different perspective on religion.

An example of reductionistic *a priori* assumptions about religion may be found in Edward O. Wilson's *The Social Conquest of the Earth*. Wilson explores how human beings have, like only a small number of other species such as some ants and wasps, evolved to be a social—or more particularly, a eusocial—species, with characteristics such as multigenerational communities, division of labor, and altruism. The evolution of a eusocial species is not driven by the competitive fitness of individual organisms, but rather by the degree of internal cooperation within social groups, which enables them compete successfully against other groups. According to Wilson, the result of this evolutionary path that resulted in the dominance of the human species is that what have come to be called “virtues” are those characteristics that helped humanity to cooperate in groups; what have come to be called “vices” are those behaviors, seen to be egotistical and self-serving, that advance one person in an evolutionary competition over another, but which weaken groups, and thus weaken their evolutionary edge over other groups. Wilson examines the implications of evolution for human nature, including language, moral development, the arts, and so on, and finds, almost everywhere, value in the fruits of what survived from and contributed to humanity's evolutionary journey. He concludes that “in many cases, perhaps the great majority, the precepts shared by most societies today will stand the test of biology-based realism” (*Social Conquest* 254). Yet,

Wilson fails to consider the possible evolutionary advantage of religion and poses the matter only in the context of a conflict between science and religion. For him, religion is mere tribalism, an “unseen trap unavoidable during the biological age of our species” (267).

A much different perspective on religion emerges in the work of researchers across a variety of fields who have, through a range of different approaches, associated religion with the evolution of the human brain, recognized the contribution of religion to cultural change especially since settlement in agricultural villages began some 10-12,000 years ago, and even proposed that religion has contributed to shaping the environment which influenced further human evolution. While the explorations into the evolutionary roots of human psychology and cultural change have taken place largely in separate fields that did not interact regularly—except perhaps in some exchanges that reframed old nature verses nurture debates—the possibility of a more collaborative exchange has opened in recent years (Schaller et. al.).

In *God is Watching You: How the Fear of God Makes Us Human*, Dominic Johnson draws upon a growing body of evidence from anthropology and experimental psychology to demonstrate that belief in supernatural reward and punishment is a ubiquitous phenomenon of human nature, even among atheists. This tendency of human beings to anticipate rewards and

punishments, especially supernatural punishments, is, he argues, an evolutionary adaption favored by natural selection. Fear of divine or supernatural punishment makes us question our selfish desires, deters self-interested action, and is a motivating factor for moral behavior and trustworthiness that allows for human cooperation. It was a factor in enabling human social organization to move beyond the level of small bands of closely related individuals, where everyone could know others' behavior directly. "The expectation of reward and punishment is not an invention of human culture; it seems to be a fundamental element of human psychology," Johnson notes. Humans "cannot help but search for meaning in the randomness of life" (3, 4). Johnson's approach is representative of a number of researchers who seek to understand human psychology from the study of human evolution. In this perspective, the workings of the human mind are the product of evolution, and the basis of religious conceptions is inherent in the workings of the mind.

A different attempt to understand humanity and the nature of religion comes from the study of cultural evolution. In *Big Gods: How Religion Transformed Cooperation and Conflict*, Ara Norenzayan proposes that human society has evolved through competition between societies, and that the societies that proved to be most successful were those that learned to cooperate internally at an ever larger scale. For Norenzayan, religion has

been the key factor driving this cooperation. He observes that while history shows a range of religious ideas that are constantly "multiplying, growing, and mutating at a brisk pace," "most religious people living on the planet today are the cultural descendants of just a few outlier religious movements that won in the cultural marketplace" (2). Norenzayan sees his approach as an integration of a perspective that places the social functions of religion in a Darwinian framework, as well as a cognitive perspective, traced as far back as Hume, that considers religious belief to be an accidental side-effect of human cognition. Evidence from the evolutionary, cognitive, and social sciences, he indicates, shows that a powerful combination of genetic and cultural evolution has contributed to the origin of religion. "Seen in this light," he states, "it is not surprising that prosocial religions have been a major force shaping human history. When intergroup rivalries are strong, prosocial religious groups, with their Big Gods and loyalty practices that promote social solidarity, could have a competitive edge over rival groups. And when prosocial religions out-compete or absorb other rival groups, their beliefs and practices proliferate, explaining why most people today are descendants of such groups" (143).

Likewise, from a historical and anthropological perspective, Peter Turchin argues instead that the main driver of human social evolution is war as a destructive and creative force, rather than religion (21-22); however, Turchin

positively acknowledges the contribution of Norenzayan and this difference may, effectively, be one of emphasis. In an analogy to biological evolution in which natural selection involves both mutation and competitive selection, it is possible to envision religious ideas that contribute to greater unity, thereby demonstrating their viability in an environment where conflict and warfare between groups is common.

The role of religion in contributing to the evolution of society is also explored in the work of Francis Fukuyama. In *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution*, he examines how religion influenced the shaping of the political order as it traversed the stages from small groups to the modern state, including the emergence of the state, the rule of law, and accountability. While noting that some contemporary voices claim that religion is primarily a source of violence, conflict, and social discord, Fukuyama states that religion has historically played the opposite role, serving as a source of cooperation and social cohesion that would not be possible if human beings were merely the rational, self-interested agents described by economists (37). Further, he adds:

Indeed, some evolutionary psychologists have argued that the survival benefits conferred by enhanced social cohesion is the reason that a propensity for religious belief seems to be hardwired into the human brain. Religion is not

the only way that ideas can reinforce group solidarity—today we have nationalism and secular ideologies like Marxism as well—but in early societies it played a critical role in making possible more complex forms of social organization. It is hard to see how human beings could have evolved beyond small band-level societies without it. (Fukuyama 38)

These few insights into the effort to explain the nature of religion suggest that, far from being easily dismissed by a materialistic ideological perspective, the impulse toward religion is hardwired by evolutionary forces into the very essence of a human being and has been a vital factor in the civilizing process of cultural change that lifted humanity from small bands of hunter-gatherers to the cusp of global order. Indeed, some of these authors take the case further, suggesting that it is evident that religion has contributed to those conditions of culture and environment in which natural selection operates to further shape human evolution and, thus, to reinforce those capacities that make human beings more religious. This type of social influence on evolutionary forces is similar to the manner in which humans developed a capacity to digest lactose after creating cultural settings that relied upon herding cattle (Norenzayan 154, Bellah 60, Fukuyama 37).

Thus, from a material and a social perspective, setting aside strictly spiritual or supernatural claims, the

constructive influence of religion and its association with capacities that are intimately intertwined with what it means to be human is demonstrated by science. What, then, does the future hold? For Norenzayan, the possibility that religion has served its purpose and can now be discarded can be entertained, even though he finds it far from clear whether secular society will win out (192). He writes:

Only recently, and only in some places, some societies have succeeded in sustaining large-scale cooperation with institutions such as courts, police, and mechanisms for enforcing contracts. In some parts of the world such as Northern Europe, especially Scandinavia, these institutions have precipitated religion's decline by usurping its community-building functions. These societies with atheist majorities—some of the most cooperative, peaceful, and prosperous in the world—climbed religion's ladder, and then kicked it away. (Norenzayan 8–9)

For Johnson, however, such a proposal raises doubt: "The New Atheists' mission of creating a godless world is an untested experiment that is likely to have negative as well as positive consequences. But we have little idea yet what any of them might be. Are we playing with fire?" (233).

One alternative to a reductionistic approach to religion, with its often pessimistic view of the place

of human beings in the universe, is religious naturalism. Some thinkers, while confining their vision to the natural world, discover in the findings of science possibilities for a spiritual or transcendent worldview, including hope for a global ethic that can guide humanity (Bellah, Kauffman, Abrams). Science and religion are, in this context, two cultural systems; values and possibilities for meaning appear as emergent properties of the universe and consciousness. One such argument is offered by Nancy Ellen Abrams in *A God That Could Be Real: Spirituality, Science, and the Future of Our Planet*, a study that illustrates how far a naturalistic perspective can extend. Abrams begins by reviewing various narratives of ancient cultures about the origin and nature of the universe and compares these with the contemporary narrative presented by science. In seeking how human beings should understand themselves in light of the facts about the history of the universe and the evolution of life, she proposes that the human inclination toward God is a product of our evolution that is necessary for survival and continued advancement. "God persists and always will because it's a fundamental characteristic of the connection between ourselves and the universe," she writes (19). Yet, Abrams is convinced that God as a being who is creator of the universe cannot exist. She proposes instead that we see God as a kind of emergent property of the complexity of human consciousness—a product of the human mind

and human society. Just as emergent properties such as temperature and pressure can be real, so can a God that emerged from humanity. By accepting the reality of the universe given to us by science, Abrams states that we can have a concept of God that is compatible with our capacity for knowledge, morality and virtue cultivated within us as a result of natural selection. Rather than various images of God that divide human beings and create suspicion about science, “We can reclaim the good that has been lost without compromising the good that has been found in this age of science,” she argues. “We can understand God in a way that serves us in the world we actually live in” (4). With such an approach, she indicates, “[w]e will see all humans, including ourselves, as flowers on the same great tree” (161).

From this naturalistic perspective, Abrams proposes a concept of God as a product of our own creation, as it would serve humanity and enable it to establish unity and cooperation on a global scale. The contribution required from a God of our own making—as set forth by an individual who rejects God as a real essence, the Creator of the universe—is nevertheless the kind of contribution Bahá'ís would readily appreciate based on the Bahá'í teachings. In countless passages, such as those that follow, Abrams indicates how a conception of God is essential for humanity in this day:

Without a story that makes sense of our many-leveled world by

showing us how we fit into it, millions of us can't tap into our smoldering potential because we remain confused about what to commit ourselves to or how. . . . We need a coherent big picture that is equally true for every human being and gives us a convincing and inspiring God that is consistent with everything we know and every truth we will learn. (147–48)

The spiritual challenge for us is to accept the scientific picture of the universe and with the real help of a real God figure out *how to act accordingly*—in every way, not just technologically but sociologically, psychologically, spiritually, educationally, politically, and every other way. It may not be obvious how to become this coherent, but for the first time it's possible, and focusing on it as a goal could re-energize our civilization. (150)

We need our god-capacity to generate the spiritual power—the motivation, trust, and faith in each other—to bring good about. How we conceive of God will have enormous impact on how we behave toward each other, how we justify our actions, what we believe is possible, and what we find sacred and are therefore willing to sacrifice to protect. (147)

The purpose of moving beyond a mere reductionistic perspective of



reality in which religion has no place, is not to superimpose preconceived religious ideas upon reality, but rather to set aside unjustified limitations on human thought in order to obtain a better picture of reality. Materialistic philosophy too often passes unquestioned, becoming indistinguishable from science itself, and then serves to filter ideas and ultimately to fit reality into an ideological framework. A rejection of reductionism is not a rejection of science. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá indicates that science is among the greatest expressions of the human mind: “All blessings are divine in origin, but none can be compared with this power of intellectual investigation and research, which is an eternal gift producing fruits of unending delight.” And, He continues, “[a] scientific man is a true index and representative of humanity, for through processes of inductive reasoning and research he is informed of all that appertains to humanity, its status, conditions and happenings. He studies the human body politic, understands social problems and weaves the web and texture of civilization” (*Promulgation* 50). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is referring to science as we know it now, a science that naturally evolves over time on the basis of its own principles and methods. He is not referring to an imagined science of the future that will conform to religious preconceptions: “Whatever the intelligence of man cannot understand, religion ought not to accept. Religion and science walk hand in hand, and any religion contrary to science is not the truth” (*Paris Talks* 131).

Bahá’ís clearly reject the materialistic interpretations of the methods of science and scientific findings that assume *a priori* that religion, in itself, is false or even pathological and detrimental. But setting aside this extreme does not mean that science must be silent or has nothing to say about the truth claims of religion. From a Bahá’í perspective, science and reason are essential for weighing the religious understandings and interpretations of individuals—their religious beliefs. The question of the scientific exploration of the truth of religion was examined in an article by Johnson et al. After setting aside extreme presumptions and exploring various nuances—including the danger of a too-ready consilience between science and religion—the authors observe that several scientists, religious scholars, philosophers, and theologians are contributing to new scholarly insights on the scientific inquiry into religion and religion’s role in human progress. In this light, they argue, the question of science’s role in weighing religious beliefs must be appreciated:

If science is going to investigate religious beliefs . . . then it is going to have to move beyond the ‘politeness’ of refusing to render judgments about the truth or falsity in some kinds of religious beliefs. However, the epistemic sword must cut all ways (Schloss 2009). Some beliefs are not adjudicable by science, not because of a commitment to remain neutral

but because science lacks the tools to make judgment. Others may be demonstrably false. But in the case of a belief that science can in principle illuminate as false, it may also be worthwhile to consider empirical or logical evidence for its truth. By some accounts, any alternative stance would not constitute a scientific approach. (225)

The authors conclude that “scientific neutrality regarding religious beliefs should, at least with particular kinds of beliefs, involve not so much refusing to render judgment as willingness to render it either way” and that certain beliefs “may be true in ways that science should be open to considering” (Johnson et al. 223). In particular, the authors point to the possible validity of religious understandings of human nature and the attributions of sacred significance to historical events, both of which could be empirically assessed. In this way, religion can be seen to legitimately contribute to the investigation of truth. The understanding of what constitutes the natural, they argue, is always tentative, ambiguous and malleable. While “novel proposals that seem to involve the supernatural, if evidentially supported, do not mandate the inclusion of the supernatural,” nevertheless, they “may expand construal of the natural” (225).

#### DEFINING TRUE RELIGION

Just as attaining the harmony of science and religion requires that science

and philosophy find a way, through their own devices, beyond reductionistic materialism and scientism, so too, religion is responsible for finding a way beyond superstition. Eliminating superstition from religion is ultimately a problem for each religious tradition. The perspective presented here—first for the definition of true religion and then its practice—is based upon the Bahá'í teachings.

There is a range of views concerning the assumptions surrounding the materialist perspective on science and the cultural debate surrounding science and religion. Of interest in such discussions is the question of what it is that actually constitutes religion. For many, religion is taken to be a belief in unseen things, a leap of faith to accept what is unknown or even incomprehensible. Indeed for some, belief in God is indistinguishable from belief in any “supernatural” forces such as ghosts, witches, or a vague sense of karma. Religion and superstition are too often indistinguishable—whether because those who hold reason dear find no cause to make a distinction, or whether those who champion religious ideas cannot separate the two.

Even in its most favorable sense, religion, viewed through a naturalistic lens, begins and ends with human beings. Robert Bellah employs what he calls a “Durkheimian definition” of religion as “a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred that unite those who adhere to them in a moral community” (1), or, paraphrasing Clifford Geertz, “religion is a system of

symbols that, when enacted by human beings, establishes powerful, pervasive, and long-standing moods and motivations that make sense in terms of an idea of a general order of existence” (xiv). In these definitions, there is no mention of belief in supernatural beings or belief in God, for while such beliefs may well be present, according to Bellah they are not the defining aspect of religion (1).

Bahá'u'lláh has provided a definition of religion that stands at variance with what has been generally conceived. Among His many statements in this regard, the following closely related points shed particular light on what is necessary to distinguish true religion from its amalgamation with superstition, which ushers in fanaticism and ungodliness.

First, Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that the starting point for religion is God, through an act of revelation of divine teachings conveyed by a series of Manifestations, the Founders of the great religious systems. Religion is not initiated in the human impulse toward transcendence, even though such an impulse is indeed a fundamental aspect of human nature. Bahá'u'lláh states that since “there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation,” “He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure and stainless Soul be made manifest” in every age to serve as a divinely guided intermediary (*Gleanings* 27:4). Religion, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá further explains, “is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs,” but

“the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man’s everlasting honor” (*Selections* 52–53).

Thus, the knowledge of God cannot be achieved through humanity’s own unaided efforts, and every attempt to do so leads to superstitious ideas being inseparably intertwined with any fragments of truth uncovered. Indeed, whenever religious practice veers too far from this revelatory impulse, the tares of superstition, of idle fancies and vain imaginings take root in human hearts, while through the Manifestation of God and His teachings, the knowledge of God and of spiritual reality is readily accessible. Of course, a naturalistic approach could not extend to fully embrace Bahá'u'lláh’s perspective. However, it could well begin its exploration of religions by considering the creative impulse provided by their Founders to transform the individual and society in the age in which They appeared, and the response of humanity to each of these interventions.

Second, Bahá'u'lláh indicates that the “religion of God is for love and unity” (*Tablets* 220); it is “the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world and of tranquility amongst its peoples” (*Tablets* 63–64). In this regard, the Bahá’í teachings affirm the conception set forth by the scientists and philosophers mentioned earlier in their conclusion that, historically, religion has contributed to

human cooperation and progress at ever higher levels of social complexity. While, owing to circumstances, the unity of the entire human race could not be established in the past, religion contributed to unity at progressive stages of social development, “starting with the family” and calling “successively into being the tribe, the city-state, and the nation,” until this day, when global order and the unity of the human race is possible. “It is the creative energies which His Revelation has released,” Shoghi Effendi explains in relation to Bahá'u'lláh's call for a united and peaceful world order, “that have instilled into humanity the capacity to attain this final stage in its organic and collective evolution” (*Promised Day* 117–18).

As noted earlier, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that superstition prevailed as religious leaders divided humanity into two trees, one divine and the other satanic. Bahá'u'lláh, however, declares that humanity, as the creation of God, is one, undermining the justification for any division. “Regard ye not one another as strangers,” He states, “Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch” (*Gleanings* 112:1). As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further explains:

He has declared that . . . all are the children of God, fruit upon the one tree of His love. . . . Therefore, we must love mankind as His creatures, realizing that all are growing upon the tree of His mercy, servants of His

omnipotent will and manifestations of His good pleasure.

Even though we find a defective branch or leaf upon this tree of humanity or an imperfect blossom, it, nevertheless, belongs to this tree and not to another. . . . There are souls in the human world who are ignorant; we must make them knowing. Some growing upon the tree are weak and ailing; we must assist them toward health and recovery. If they are as infants in development, we must minister to them until they attain maturity. We should never detest and shun them as objectionable and unworthy. (*Promulgation* 230–31)

As a source of unity and love, religion is not to be a source of conflict, especially contention between religious traditions. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh explains that religion is one. The Manifestations of God taught the same fundamental moral truths as well as provided certain social laws that varied according to the exigencies of the time and the limitations of the particular developmental stage of humanity. The perception that these various religions are irreconcilably different, the Bahá'í writings explain, is to some extent owing to these differing social teachings, but is mostly a result of the accumulation of centuries of man-made interpretations and interpolations within each tradition. For example, if, as is obvious, Christianity is not united as one, it is not

because of what Christ taught, but because of what human beings added or misinterpreted. Bahá'u'lláh enjoins His followers to share the precious gift of His teachings with others, but then to accept whatever the response might be, whether positive or negative, while continuing to demonstrate love and affection and to work in harmony with other faith traditions for the betterment of the world (*Tabernacle* 41).

Yet another point raised by Bahá'u'lláh that distinguishes true religion from superstition is that religion is concerned with that which is true and that which is right. The independent investigation of truth is enjoined upon all. Faith is not a matter of unthinking acceptance of unseen things and irrational ideas, or a body of immutable and untenable supernatural concepts. Rather, faith is conscious knowledge and its translation into practice through good deeds. Religious laws and exhortations are not a matter of blind obedience by weak individuals conforming to an arbitrary set of rules enforced by a controlling religious authority. Bahá'u'lláh indicates the law of God is not “a mere code of laws” (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* ¶ 5) but “the breath of life unto all created things,” “the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples” (¶ 2) that is intended to cultivate human potentialities and virtues. The aim of such laws—whose binding claims are consciously assessed, embraced, and applied by individual choice—is human freedom, in the same way that traffic

laws allow for the free and safe collective flow of vehicles. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is man's freedom, that through the ideal Power he should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world of nature; for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal, as the struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature. This matter of the struggle for existence is the fountain-head of all calamities and is the supreme affliction. (*Selections* 302)

If religion is concerned with truth, then it must be in accord with science and reason. “Religion must be reasonable,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, and “if it does not square with reason, it is superstition and without foundation.” “If we insist that such and such a subject is not to be reasoned out and tested according to the established logical modes of the intellect,” He adds, “what is the use of the reason which God has given man?” (*Promulgation* 63).

Ultimately, the truth of religion is not just rational but empirical—it must be demonstrated through productive results in the world. As Jesus stated, “Ye shall know them by their fruits. . . . A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit” (*Matthew* 7:16, 18). This principle is also affirmed by Bahá'u'lláh: “[I]s not the object of every Revelation to effect a

transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God's universal Manifestations would be apparent" (Kitáb-i-Íqán 240–41). If certain practices in the name of religion produce harmful results—war, hate, oppression, prejudice, injustice, and so on—then this is not the practice of true religion, whose results should be love, unity, education, cooperation, and personal and collective upliftment. This is a definitive test that separates true religion from superstition presented in the guise of religion. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:

Universal benefits derive from the grace of the Divine religions, for they lead their true followers to sincerity of intent, to high purpose, to purity and spotless honor, to surpassing kindness and compassion, to the keeping of their covenants when they have covenanted, to concern for the rights of others, to liberality, to justice in every aspect of life, to humanity and philanthropy, to valor and to unflagging efforts in the service of mankind. It is religion, to sum up, which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilization. If a man is not characterized by these excellent qualities, it is certain that he

has never attained to so much as a drop out of the fathomless river of the waters of life that flows through the teachings of the Holy Books. . . . (*Secret* 98)

Science is a powerful system of knowledge because ideas about reality can be tested against the facts of physical world, allowing humanity to gain a better understanding of reality and a mastery over aspects of physical reality. Thus, it is not a "belief" that a particular cure heals a disease; a treatment is a cure only if its result can be demonstrated as an empirical fact. If religion is to be treated according to its claim to be a valid system of thought and action that contributes to human well-being, it must meet an empirical test—and this standard is required not only by reason but by explicit religious texts.

When religion has been warped by superstition, and fails to bring forth good fruits, it must be reformed. History is filled with examples of religious reformers who have clarified the essential principles of their religion and have uplifted its practice. Each religious tradition has within it the fire of divine truth, and each can strive to find, in its own ways and within its body of beliefs, principles such as those discussed here that can rekindle and refine religious practice, purify it from superstition, and, thereby, cause it to be in harmony with science and reason. Ultimately, however, it may be found that it is God Who reforms religion by reigniting the divine flame;



the divine forces introduced at the start of any religion are manifested again in a process of progressive revelation that is the ultimate safeguard of true religion.

Finally, according to Bahá'u'lláh, true religion is intended to assist human beings to understand their true nature and purpose, and the larger meaningful story of which they are a part. He states that “man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty. . . . The straight path is the one which guideth man to the dayspring of perception and to the dawning-place of true understanding and leadeth him to that which will redound to glory, honour and greatness” (*Tablets* 35).

Religion, for Bahá'u'lláh, serves a twofold moral purpose: to foster human capacity for personal development and to contribute to the betterment of society. The particular challenge of this age is to transform the spiritual principle of the oneness of humanity into a practical global social order that reflects the unity of the human race. He calls for humanity to overcome prejudices of all kinds and arrange its affairs for unity among nations and peoples, finally achieving the Great Peace anticipated by seers and poets since antiquity—a level of cooperation at the global scale to crown the prior levels of cooperation religion created in the past to advance the social order. He promises that “such means as lead to the elevation, the advancement, the education, the

protection and the regeneration of the peoples of the earth have been clearly set forth” in His Teachings (*Tablets* 130), thus anticipating Abrams call for “a real God” to help “figure out how to act . . . in every way” (150).

The meaning and purpose for humanity set forth by true religion as described by Bahá'u'lláh is coherent with the naturalistic premise that consciousness in the universe is not accidental but inevitable, based on the laws governing the universe from the moment of the Big Bang. And it provides a more robust perspective for all of us, whatever our personal beliefs, to investigate a meaning of life more worthy of human beings, individually and collectively, than the materialists' appeal to create one's own. Inasmuch as the latter can never escape the shadow of relativism, it can never take humanity beyond conflict and the contest for power—the animalistic struggle of the survival of the fittest.

This story of meaning and purpose told by true religion, according to the Bahá'í Teachings, is also coherent with the contemporary scientific understanding of the cosmos, of the appearance of humanity, and of the unfoldment of human culture, whereby the known universe has existed for nearly fourteen billion years, modern human beings around two hundred thousand years ago, and the beginning of agricultural society—and thus the roots of civilization—only some ten to twelve thousand years ago. This support for the prevailing scientific worldview is evident in a host of

passages, including the acknowledgement that creation is “not one or two hundred thousand, or even one or two million years old” but “very ancient” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 41:3); in the recognition that from “the mineral kingdom,” the human body “traversed the vegetable kingdom and its constituent substances” and from there “has risen by evolution into the kingdom of the animal and from thence attained the kingdom of man” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 307), where, although possessing “all the virtues of the lower kingdoms . . . is further endowed with the spiritual faculty, the heavenly gift of consciousness” (258); in the appearance of religious and moral guidance from age to age through progressive revelation, demonstrating that religious truth is relative and not absolute, and that even universal principles must be applied to changing contexts; in the understanding that society has evolved through a series of social stages that witnessed an expanding circle of cooperation and will continue “until it culminates in the unification of the whole world, the final object and the crowning glory of human evolution on this planet” (Shoghi Effendi, *Promised Day* 117–18); in “the coming of age of the entire human race,” which will witness the “emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture” (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 163); and in the anticipation of a cycle of mature human development lasting at least five hundred thousand years (102).

#### LEARNING ABOUT THE PRACTICE OF TRUE RELIGION

For the Bahá'í community, the practice of true religion requires growing in capacity over time to translate Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings—His concept of religion—into systematic action as a remedy for the ills afflicting humanity. Bahá'ís are increasingly coming to understand their current efforts in this light. There is, of course, a personal dimension to transformation, involving a daily discipline of study, prayer, meditation, and reflection to improve moral behavior, but the focus here is on the collective.

The vision of how the Bahá'í community is to move gradually from its earliest stages to realize its society-building power, as well as the means for its initial systematic development, were set forth in the writings of Shoghi Effendi over the course of his ministry. Briefly, he described three ages: Heroic, Formative, and Golden (*Citadel* 4–5). The current one, the Formative Age, which began with the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, involves “the crystallization and shaping of the creative energies released” by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation (*God Passes By* xiii). It is the age in which the local, national and international institutions of the Faith are to “take shape, develop and become fully consolidated” (324). It involves the systematic spread and consolidation of the Faith, encompassing the many stages of the unfoldment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá's Divine Plan. It is the period that will witness

the establishment of the Great, or Lesser, Peace and the unity of mankind. It will also experience the emancipation of the Faith and the recognition of its status and an independent religion, setting the stage for the consummation of the Dispensation in the Golden Age, the spiritualization of the world, the realization of the Most Great Peace, and “the birth and efflorescence of a world civilization, the child of that Peace” (*Citadel* 6).

The efforts unfolding during the Formative Age can be understood against a backdrop of what Shoghi Effendi described as the processes of integration and disintegration, “with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other” (*Advent* 72–73), which are “associated respectively with the rising fortunes of God’s infant Faith and the sinking fortunes of the institutions of a declining civilization” (*Messages to the Bahá’í World* 102). A lamentably defective old world order has witnessed, since the dawn of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation, “the ominous manifestations of acute political conflict, of social unrest, of racial animosity, of class antagonism, of immorality and of irreligion, proclaiming, in no uncertain terms, the corruption and obsolescence of the institutions of a bankrupt Order” (103). The progress of the Faith which marks the integrative process will advance, Shoghi Effendi explained, through three great phases: a steady flow of new believers, followed by the entry by troops of peoples of diverse nations and races into the Bahá’í community, and, ultimately,

a mass conversion of these same nations and races, “as a direct result of a chain of events” which will “suddenly revolutionize the fortunes of the Faith, derange the equilibrium of the world, and reinforce a thousandfold the numerical strength as well as the material power and the spiritual authority of the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh” (*Citadel* 117). The Bahá’í community is currently involved in learning and disseminating the capacity to deal systematically with the second of these, advancing the process of entry by troops.

The Golden Age of the Bahá’í Faith offers the promise of the full realization of Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings for humanity. Yet, the Formative Age clearly implies the limited capacity of the Bahá’ís in the early part of the Dispensation and the critical challenge of learning to put the teachings into action with growing effectiveness over time. For example, at its start in 1921, the Bahá’í community was simply too small to have an impact on social order. Shoghi Effendi urged the believers to make efforts to spread the Faith, raise institutions, and transform themselves, in anticipation of the time when they would be called upon to work to eradicate evil tendencies such as political corruption, moral laxity, and extreme prejudice from the wider society. For, as he explained, the world order of Bahá’u’lláh, whose “first stirrings” would occur in the second Bahá’í century which ends in 2044 (*Messages to America* 96), “can never be reared unless and until the generality of the people to which they belong has

been already purged from the divers ills, whether social or political, that now so severely afflict it" (*Advent* 21).

In light of this panorama of the unfoldment of the Bahá'í Faith provided by Shoghi Effendi, the relevance of the activities in which Bahá'ís are currently engaged for a world that has lost its direction—and is witnessing daily the steady erosion of the consensus on which the social order depends—becomes starkly apparent. As the process of disintegration accelerates, the efforts of the Bahá'í community as it pursues an integrative process through the systematic execution of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Divine Plan must likewise intensify. The Plan which embodies the Master's hopes, Shoghi Effendi wrote, "must be pursued, relentlessly pursued, whatever may befall them in the future, however distracting the crises that may agitate their country or the world," for "the synchronization of such world-shaking crises with the progressive unfoldment and fruition of their divinely appointed task is itself the work of Providence" (*Advent* 72).

To seize upon the opportunities presented to become protagonists of change, Bahá'ís must guard against being drawn to accept the debates, assumptions, social conventions, and contests provoked by the forces of disintegration. 'Abdu'l-Bahá foretold that the Bahá'ís would face severe mental tests, and it is the tension between what the mind perceives to be real—the idle fancies and vain imaginings of a disintegrating world order—and a new reality as presented by

Bahá'u'lláh, that creates such mental tests. As Shoghi Effendi warned, in a letter written on his behalf:

The friends must, at all times, bear in mind that they are, in a way, like soldiers under attack. The world is at present in an exceedingly dark condition spiritually; hatred and prejudice of every sort are literally tearing it to pieces. We, on the other hand, are the custodians of the opposite forces, the forces of love, of unity, of peace and integration, and we must continually be on our guard, whether as individuals or as an Assembly or Community, lest through us these destructive, negative forces enter into our midst. In other words, we must beware lest the darkness of society become reflected in our acts and attitudes, perhaps all unconsciously. Love for each other, the deep sense that we are a new organism, the dawn-breakers of a new World Order, must constantly animate our Bahá'í lives, and we must pray to be protected from the contamination of society which is so diseased with prejudice. (*Directives* 41)

The efforts of the Bahá'í world at its current stage of development, as it brings to fruition the stage of entry by troops and establishes a conscious capacity for learning how to put the teachings into action in country after country and cluster<sup>4</sup> after cluster, are

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4 A geographic unit defined for the

described in detail in the messages of the Universal House of Justice (especially since 1996) and in other materials, such as the analysis and summary of achievements prepared for each stage of the Divine Plan. A brief summary here must suffice.

#### *COMMUNITY BUILDING AND GROWTH*

Since the Five Year Plan that began in 2001, the Bahá'í world has concerned itself with two essential movements that have driven the process of expansion and consolidation: the movement of individuals through the sequence of courses of the training institute, and the movement of clusters to ever greater degrees of complexity in community building. In the most recent Plan, community building has been described in terms of progress along a path distinguished by a number of milestones. Currently, the most advanced clusters have reached the capacity to raise one hundred, or perhaps several hundreds of capable individuals to create a pattern of community life that can engage a thousand or more. Yet progress is marked not just through quantitative change, but also a number of distinctive qualitative achievements derived by the strengthening of the capabilities of individuals, communities, and institutions. These include: attracting people to engage in Bahá'í community life

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purpose of community-building that encompasses a number of cities, towns or villages.

through a range of elevated conversations that meaningfully present the Teachings in both direct and indirect manner; the multiplication and support by more and more individuals of efficacious core activities—study circles, devotional meetings, children's classes, and junior youth groups—that serve as social spaces for the participation of the growing number of attracted souls; the ability to engage in a learning mode within clusters from which purposeful action is pursued; continual enhancement of the spiritual life of Bahá'í communities; greater involvement in the life of society; and growing recognition among government agencies and leaders of thought about the efficacy of Bahá'í efforts for the betterment of society. The aims of the current Plan include the effort to move no less than 5,000 clusters to an intensive program of growth where scores engage hundreds, along with advancing several hundred of these clusters to further frontiers of development.

#### *SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT*

As part of a Bahá'í life, and in accordance with the example set by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a large number of individual believers draws insights from Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and contributes in diverse ways, through voluntary efforts or occupations, to the social and economic progress of their localities and nations. Beyond this, as the community building process has accelerated, involvement in Bahá'í and

Bahá'í-inspired activities for social and economic development has grown systematically in size and influence. In its *Riḍván 2010* message, the Universal House of Justice called on the worldwide Bahá'í community to reflect on the contributions that its growing, vibrant communities will make “to improve some aspect of the social or economic life of a population, however modestly.” “Most appropriately conceived in terms of a spectrum,” it stated, “social action can range from fairly informal efforts of limited duration undertaken by individuals or small groups of friends to programs of social and economic development with a high level of complexity and sophistication implemented by Bahá'í-inspired organizations.” The number of grassroots activities, many of fixed duration, have now passed ten thousand annually. Sustained projects, many educational in nature, number more than one thousand. Meanwhile more complex agencies, including a number of Bahá'í-inspired development organizations, are now more than one hundred. Learning how to expand the scope of certain programs of proven effectiveness within and across countries has also rapidly accelerated. For example, the junior youth program, initiated more than a decade ago, now includes more than 17,000 groups and over 155,000 participants worldwide. The community schools program, established more recently, involving the establishment of community-based primary schools, has expanded in Africa, Latin America, Asia,

and the Pacific. Currently, twenty-six Bahá'í-inspired agencies are working with 427 schools, over 1325 teachers and 27,850 students in 175 clusters in 20 countries. Details of these and other endeavors may be found in various reports and documents prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre.

*INVOLVEMENT IN THE DISCOURSES  
OF SOCIETY*

Yet another area of endeavor of the Bahá'í community is a greater involvement in the discourses of society. This area of work has a long history—as evident in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's own interactions with groups and prominent individuals—and has become more systematic in recent years. One feature of the old world order as it disintegrates is that the discourses among individuals and groups has become riven with dichotomies that pit “us” against “them”; the challenge for Bahá'ís is to assist in recasting these conversations, through insights drawn from Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, to elevate and frame the subjects for discourse in a manner that creates the conditions for united action, and to rise above the points of discord to find agreement in the search for solutions through consultation and learning. Individual believers participate in a variety of social spaces and everyday conversations, including in their professions, where they can bring to bear relevant insights from the Teachings. The progress of community building activities



at the cluster level has accelerated, thereby opening increased opportunities for both Bahá'ís and other participants from the wider society to engage together on relevant themes of social concern in villages and neighborhoods. At the international level, the United Nations Office of the Bahá'í International Community and other agencies are expanding the scope of their endeavors to engage governments and organizations of civil society through various published statements and participation in international and regional fora. And at the national level, agencies of National Assemblies, with the support of the Office of Public Discourse at the Bahá'í World Centre, are learning to select and strengthen their participation in discourses of particular relevance to their countries. Some noteworthy recent interactions include the engagement of the Bahá'í communities in certain Arab countries directly with their governments, and the involvement of the Bahá'ís of Germany in the national discourse on immigration, the Bahá'ís of Colombia on peace and reconciliation, the Bahá'ís of Canada on the role of religion in society, and the Bahá'ís of Turkey on the involvement of women in society.

In all these and in others areas as well, Bahá'ís are collectively learning about the practice of true religion and its society-building power. The recent series of Five Year Plans have illustrated how the process of study, consultation, action and reflection gradually refines effective approaches and ensures a steady multiplication

and spread worldwide of endeavors that have been proven by experience to be effective. This does not mean that there are no challenges or even outright problems, but that, with unity of thought and action, through the reflective practice of religion, scientific in its method, solutions can be found and progressively implemented. As such systematic endeavors are sustained in the decades ahead, a different example of religion and a greater demonstration of its civilizing force will become evident. The Bahá'í world at the end of its second century will be significantly transformed and its capacities enhanced to play the vital role anticipated and outlined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. The forces of disintegration will only continue to intensify, and thus, as the world staggers toward a global order of peace among nations as anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh, the forces of integration must equally build to touch as wide a circle of humanity as possible.

#### CONCLUSION

At the heart of the assumptions on which science rests is the belief that the universe operates in a lawful manner which the mind is capable of objectively discerning in a reliable, if fallibilistic, way. The demonstrable value of science strengthens our faith in such capacities. At the same time, we have increasingly come to view with suspicion and doubt those capacities of the mind that provide us with perspectives on subjective and normative

dimensions of reality, capacities that are perhaps no less essential for our survival and flourishing. Perhaps we can learn to trust both, so long as these inherent capacities are properly channeled.

The path that ultimately leads to the understanding and practice of Bahá'u'lláh's principle of the harmony between science and religion may be a long one, but the horizon that can guide the next steps in its realization is already somewhat apparent. For science and philosophy, the path requires a move from an atheistic, reductionistic materialism to a kind of agnostic, biological naturalism that better accommodates the reality of the mind and consciousness as it exists in the universe. For religion, the challenge is infinitely harder. For while humanity has made its scientific turn centuries ago, crossing a threshold to rational maturity that is well substantiated and continually refined, religion has not yet been similarly transformed, and remains in a quagmire of superstition, prejudice and immaturity that is too often detached from truth and from proven worth in engendering justice and human well-being.

Searle tells the story of his time as a student with the eminent philosopher Bertrand Russell:

Periodically, every two years or so, the Voltaire Society, a society of intellectually inclined undergraduates at Oxford, held a banquet with Bertrand Russell—the official patron of the society. On

the occasion in question, we all went up to London and had dinner with Russell at a restaurant. He was then in his mideighties, and had a reputation as a famous atheist. To many of us, the question seemed pressing as to what sort of prospects for immortality Russell entertained, and we put it to him: Suppose you have been wrong about the existence of God. Suppose that the whole story were true, and that you arrived at the Pearly Gates to be admitted by Saint Peter. Having denied God's existence all your life, what would you say to . . . Him? Russell answered without a moment's hesitation. "Well, I would go up to Him, and I would say, 'You didn't give us enough evidence!'" (36)

Science from various fields, freed from reductionistic interpretations, increasingly sheds light on the ways in which religion has contributed to human survival and evolution of culture, but true religion cannot emerge in the form of an effective knowledge system in harmony with science until it becomes translated into a systematic form of reliable and proven practice. It must be fully compatible with the truths that emerge from science and philosophy, shed additional light on aspects of reality that stand outside their reach, and contribute to a normative framework that distinguishes morality from personal inclination. The redefinition of religion for the age of human maturity by Bahá'u'lláh implies

no less a revolution in the behavior of humanity and the evolution of culture than the creation of science from the late 1500s to the dawn of the 1700s. It is therefore necessary to prove true religion like true science—to act and demonstrate that it works. As Shoghi Effendi explained at the start of the systematic execution of the Divine Plan: “Let the doubter arise and himself verify the truth of such assertions” (*Messages to America* 17).

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