

## Religion and Science in the New Millennium: A Baha'i Perspective

— *Dr. A. K. Merchant*

This essay is based on the study of the Baha'i scriptures and the works of a number of Baha'i scholars notably the following three: Stanwood Cobb, William Hatcher and Anjam Khursheed who have done pioneering researches in explaining the Baha'i principle of unity of science and religion. Ever since the Industrial Revolution science has been increasingly dominating our lives and religion, save for its manifestation in the rites of passage in the individual's life and the costumes worn by its ordained leadership losing out. For most observers it is an unequal battle for the proper understanding of the true nature of our world and our existence in it. The scientists seem to have won. With a stunning succession of theories they have appeared to oust one by one the religious teachings on these questions. Today, many people in the West firmly believe that religion is at best an outmoded set of values and beliefs—once useful to more primitive society but no longer necessary—and at worst it represents a set of superstitious dogmas that cause considerable conflict and strife in the world.

Science also seems to have won a kind of moral contest. It has had the humility to lay all of its pronouncements open to the freest criticism, demanding nothing to be taken on faith or as a matter of obligation. Religion, by contrast, has often prided itself on the infallibility of its doctrines, making its beliefs exempt from revision and, at certain points in history, not hesitating to impose them by torture and burning at the stake. Since science has a method for choosing rationally between rival theories, it has progressed peacefully and brought together people of every nation, race and tradition in a harmonious quest for knowledge. Religion, however, has often clung to outmoded visions and has divided people against each other in a deafening quarrel between conflicting dogmas. It also stands accused of making false promises by speaking of eternal rewards for the faithful. According to some thinkers, these promises are best understood as instruments of social oppression by which ruling social elites retain the obedience of exploited classes and secure their resignation to inadequate earthly rewards.

In its original Latin sense, 'profane' means 'outside the temple'.<sup>1</sup> It is as though we have made of our civilization a temple to science, with scientists as the priests of the New Age, and it is not religion that stands outside. To speak well of religion has even become a way of using language tastelessly; the old distinction between the sacred and the profane has been inverted. From our great distance in time, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that even this distinction did not always hold.

When European religion was transformed in the Christian era into a hierarchical, authoritarian structure, it became obligatory for inquiry to fix its gaze almost exclusively on the divine. For almost a millennium before, however, Greek thinkers had freely pursued religious insight, philosophical abstraction and scientific investigation in a single quest for nourishment of the soul. Religion was to be found outside the temple as much as science, and both were sacred.

It is true that science progressed slowly in the days of this ancient harmony. It is also true that in order to become the great gift that it is today it has had to go through a period of conflict with the religious and philosophical preconceptions that held it back. No one would want to return, out of an unscientific nostalgia, to the days before Galileo and Newton. The purpose of the present essay is to acknowledge and explore the vital link between the practical and spiritual aspects of human life that helps one in understanding what constitutes well being and of the possible mechanisms for attaining such well-being. This realization underlines the need for a proper acceptance of the roles that science and religion play in the advancement of civilization as we know it.<sup>2</sup>

A first step in an inquiry of this nature is to understand the essential functions of science and religion in human society. Throughout history, civilization has depended upon science and religion as the two principal systems of knowledge that have guided its development and channeled its intellectual and moral powers. The methods of science have allowed humanity to construct a coherent understanding of the laws and processes governing physical reality, and, to a certain degree, the workings of society itself. The insights of religion have provided understanding relating to the deepest questions of human purpose and initiative. During the moments in history when these two agencies have operated in concert, peoples and cultures have freed themselves from destructive habits and practices and attained to new levels of technical, artistic and ethical achievement. In effect, action is an offspring of knowledge, and therefore, science and religion are instruments or expressions of human will.

Science and religion, however, have often been regarded as inherently conflictual, even mutually exclusive spheres of human endeavour. That the vitalizing agency of religion has frequently succumbed to the forces of dogmatism, superstition, and theological factionalism is a conspicuous fact of history. The Enlightenment, in fact, marked a crucial turning point in releasing human consciousness from the shackles of religious orthodoxy and fanaticism. But in its rejection of religion, the Enlightenment also rejected the moral centre that religion provided, creating a deep and still existing dichotomy between the rational and the sacred. The results of this artificial split between reason and faith can be seen in the skepticism alienation and corrosive materialism that so pervades contemporary life.

For the vast majority of humankind, the proposition that human nature has spiritual dimension is a self-evident truth that finds expression in all spheres of life. Within the human being there exist fundamental longings that inclines it towards transcendence, towards contemplation of the underlying causes of existence and the mystery of human reality itself. These basic existential yearnings have been met throughout the ages by the world's religions. The spiritual impulses set in motion by these religious systems have been the chief influence in the civilizing of human character. Through the teachings and moral guidance of religion, great segments of humanity have learned to discipline their baser propensities and to develop qualities that conduce to social order and cultural advancement.

Such qualities—compassion, forbearance, trustworthiness, generosity, humility, courage, and willingness to sacrifice for the common good—have constituted the invisible yet essential foundations of progressive community life. Recognition and cultivation of humanity's spiritual nature have engendered cohesion and unity of purpose within and across societies and served as the wellspring of the vital expressions of civilization.

In its truest form, devoid of dogmatic accretions, religion has imparted spiritual moral verities that in no way contradict the discovered truths of science. There is no substantive basis to the contention that an intrinsic incompatibility exists between science and religion. The process of scientific discovery itself involves human faculties such as imagination and intuition, in addition to reason, and cannot be regarded simply as a set of well-defined procedures. The historic dichotomy between reason and faith is a false dichotomy. They are complementary faculties of human nature that both engage in the process of discovering and understanding reality; they are both tools that enable society to apprehend truth.

This perspective is reinforced by recent scientific developments that suggest strong epistemological convergence with various religious world-views. Modern physics and psychology, for example, cast considerable doubt on the notion that matter is the primary basis of reality, or that human consciousness is a simple derivative of neurochemical processes. The reductionism and determinism associated with Newtonian mechanics is now giving way to an understanding of physical phenomena in which the universe is regarded as an ever evolving, interconnected, and unified whole. The fact that physical laws permit complex biological configurations to emerge and evolve to the point of consciousness suggests evidence of higher-level organizational laws and even design. In short, there is nothing unscientific in the assumption that a Creative or Divine force is at work in the world.

These points only bear importance insofar as they encourage a more rigorous and unified interchange between scientific and religious streams of inquiry. Taken together, science and religion provide the fundamental organizing principles by which individuals, communities, and institutions function and evolve. Utilizing the methods of science allows people to become more objective and systematic in their approach to problem solving and in their understanding of social processes, while drawing on the spiritual inclinations of individuals provides the motivational impetus that begets and sustains positive action. Meaningful transformation of the conditions of society does not simply involve the acquisition of technical skills, but more important, the development of qualities and attitudes that foster co-operative and creative patterns of human interaction. Understanding the forces that can effect changes in attitudes and behaviours is an area of study that lies at the interface between science and religion.

A discourse that views the spiritual and material domains of existence as interwoven into the process of development entails a clear break from present development methodology. That science and religion have mutually reinforcing roles to play in the advancement of civilization past notions of exclusivism by scientists and religionists will have to be done away with. Sociological and organizational questions relating to social and economic advancement must, of necessity, refer to spiritual perspectives and values. However, the manner in which spiritual perspectives are integrated into addressing the manifold crises in the society must involve the same logical and rigorous methods

employed by science. To recapture the imagination and character of man, religion must first come to terms with science; not by surrendering to science one jot of truth or principle, but by restating spiritual truth in terms compatible with the known and accepted truths of science. There must be reconciliation between science and religion. Both are needed by humanity. Baha'u'llah, Founder-Prophet of the Baha'i Faith, made reconciliation of science and religion one of the cardinal points of the Baha'i teachings. He upheld the authority of science.

“Knowledge is as wings to man’s life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone. The knowledge of such sciences, however, should be acquired as can profit the peoples of the earth, and not those which begin with words and end with words. Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world...”<sup>3</sup>

That the progress of the human race is dependent upon the aspect of truth revealed by science and as well as by the aspect of truth revealed by religion—is unequivocally upheld.

In 1912, Baha'u'llah's son and appointed successor, 'Abdu'l-Baha, told an American audience that science and religion were the two wings upon which civilization must fly:

“We may think of science as one wing and religion as the other; a bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless. Any religion that contradicts science, or that is opposed to it, is only ignorance.... Religion which consists only of rites and ceremonies of prejudice is not the Truth.... Much of the discord and disunion of the world is created by these man-made oppositions and contradictions. If religion were in harmony with science ... much of the hatred and bitterness now bringing misery to the human race would be at an end. I say to you: Weigh carefully in the balance of reason and science everything that is presented to you as—religion. If it passes this test, then accept it, for it is Truth. If, however, it does not so conform, then reject it, for it is ignorance. It is impossible for Religion to be contrary to science, even though some intellects are too weak or too immature to understand truth. God made religion and science to be the measure, as it were, of our understanding. Take heed that you neglect not such a wonderful power. Weigh all things in this balance. Put all your beliefs into harmony with science, there can be no opposition, for truth is one. When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world, which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles, and then will mankind be united in the power of the love of God”.<sup>4</sup>

In promulgating the teachings of Baha'u'llah to the West, 'Abdu'l-Baha frequently stressed the point that for the first time in human history the founder of a major religion had championed the cause of science and clarified the interdependence of each in the path of progress. “Mankind hath been created to carry forward an ever advancing civilization,” stated Baha'u'llah.<sup>5</sup> When speaking at Leland Stanford University in 1912, 'Abdu'l-Baha called science the “illumination of the world of humanity.” He stated:

“The greatest attainment in the world of humanity has ever been scientific in nature. It is the discovery of the realities of things.... The highest praise is due to men who devote their energies to science; and the noblest centre is a centre wherein the sciences and arts are taught and studied. Science ever tends to the illumination of the world of humanity... All human discoveries were once secrets and mysteries sealed and stored up in the bosom of the material universe until the mind of man which is the greatest of divine effluences penetrated them and made them subservient to his will and purpose”.<sup>6</sup>

As in all conflicts, a mutual understanding of the role of each contestant would eliminate the struggle for power over men's minds. If science needs guidance for the fruits of its work, religion can supply that guidance by its influence. If religion understands physical well-being and an ever-expanding knowledge of our environment to be part of the Creator's plan for human evolution, it can look to science to nurture that well-being. George Sarton, professor of Science, History at Harvard University, stated the need for this wider understanding comprehensively and beautifully in his book *The Life of Science*:

"The greatest story which cries to be told is that of the rhythm of the mutual inter-relations between science, art and religion. The story is very difficult to tell because it is not a story of progress like the history of science, but of vacillations and vicissitudes, harmony followed by chaos, beauty mixed with horrors... the story of man's sensitiveness to the fundamental problems and the main values of life."<sup>7</sup>

In delineating the four epochs of the history of science, Sarton brings out in astonishing manner how strong the rhythm has been. The foundations of science were laid for us by the Mesopotamian civilizations, whose scholars and scientists were their priests; and to them we owe the foundations of medicine, navigation, astronomy and some mathematics. The second development came through the Greeks, as taught in the traditional way in our schools and colleges. The third stage of development, however, is to be credited to the meteoric rise of Islam, whose Abbassid caliphs drank avidly at the fountain of the ancient Persian and Hindu, as well as Greek sources of knowledge. For nearly four hundred years Islam led the scientific world as from one end of Islam to the other, from Spain to India, the great body of past knowledge was exchanged between her scholars and the torch carried forward with new discoveries. Scholars of Christendom from about the eleventh century, were mainly occupied for over two hundred years in re-translating from Arabic into Latin the same knowledge that had been denied them when the church closed its doors on pagan Greece. Thus, Islam paved the way for the Renaissance, which in turn led to science's fourth great development in our modern western world. In two out of the four epochs it was the stimulus of religion that fostered science.

As if anticipating the needs of future generations born in a golden age of science, Baha'u'llah has left a statement concerning God that seems keyed to the understanding of a scientific mind.

"Unity in its true meaning is that God should be realized as the one power which animates and dominates all things which are but the manifestations of its energy."<sup>8</sup>

The careful avoidance here of any definition of God is striking. The words are 'should be realized', as if, envisioning the great scientific age dawning, all scientific exploration of that energy could be encompassed entirely within that realization. For the words 'all things' include mental energy and the vast field of man's inspired intellectual accomplishments.

The statement does not stop there. It is prefaced by the words 'Unity in its true meaning is...' What unity? Unity of thought between science and faith on truth, obviously. Also unity between religious systems, whose basic teachings could find only confirmation in the statement. With basic unity realizable between religions on their most fundamental point—the existence of God—and unity on basic truth established between science and religion, we arrive at an approach to unity in all other fields. Like the British mathematician who confessed that if he had not the faith in a marvelous moral order in the universe life would not be worth living, there are millions of intelligent

people who find church creeds incredible, but long for the bread of a reasonable faith. Even an agnostic scientist, however, would find sympathetic insight into his attitude of mind in many statements of Baha'u'llah concerning the Deity and concerning the utter inability of the human mind to comprehend God.

Baha'u'llah reasonably points out that we do not know even the inner reality of our own selves nor of our fellowmen. We know what makes us tick physically—at least, we almost know—and our investigations into the human mind and lately the studies in genetic engineering and the human genome mapping have opened up new vistas to our understanding of emotions and mental processes. But there are realms of consciousness in us far beyond that; and we do not even know the wellspring of the spark of physical life.

New researches into psychology have started us on an understanding of what Baha'u'llah terms characteristics and attributes. The characteristics or attributes of all things are the standards by which we recognize them, including ourselves. This, then, would be the only manner in which we might apprehend the existence of the Deity—the evidences of divine attributes. Thus, that theology professor was correct who accept the majesty, beauty and grandeur of creation as an evidence of the energy of that “single power that animates and dominates all things.” Truth, wisdom, love, mercy, knowledge, etc., are likewise attributes of that Power, infinitely greater than any one human being or all humanity together, but in which we all share and understand as something nearer the divine and far beyond our physical, animal being.

These characteristics and their inspiration for the human mind and soul are the study of what 'Abdu'l-Baha referred to as 'divine science' as distinct from material science. Here is another point of reconciliation between science and religion. Just as humanity has benefited immensely from the intelligence of the scientists, so the scientist will find protection for his work by harnessing his intelligence to this 'one power that animates and dominates all things. Faith in the divine attributes of truth, wisdom, love, mercy, knowledge, beauty, power, and the endeavour to practice them, enabled us to build the ladder of our ascent from jungle man to where we are today.

This is the only 'creed' Baha'u'llah taught: to resuscitate these attributes in each individual conscience and to bring their healing power to the cure of our maladjustments, our prejudices, our ignorance, for the establishment of that unified, peaceful, one-world society which is the only possible step forward that the march of human progress can take on this planet. What quarrel could be left between science and religion on such a basis for active faith?

How long will it take for universal acceptance and a fairly effective universal achievement of this important and essential element of a new world order? It does not need a clairvoyant to answer this question. Sociologists, through their science of statistics, are frequently able to prognosticate with remarkable fidelity situations a few decades ahead. This, they do by plotting the past curve of progress of any particular trend, and continuing this curve into the future. This can even be done mathematically, and this process is called 'extrapolation.'

Two main concepts lift the Baha'is above discouragement in the face of whatever perils that threaten. First, they believe that destiny operates in human affairs; and that, as Baha'u'llah has said, it is the will of God that science and religion should unitedly work for the advancement of present-

day society. Second, they accept that the period into which humanity is moving will open to every individual, every institution, and every community on earth unprecedented opportunities to participate in the writing of the planet's future. By turning to the great Cosmic Force, and learning how to spiritualize those human institutions—scientific as well as secular—now so ridden by termites that they are ripe for fall.

True religion has always been a cohesive force, capable of unifying diverse cultures and habits. On the intellectual plane human beings will always differ; and this is as it should be, for the intellect is essentially an analytical instrument. Only on the spiritual plane can complete harmony of aim and action be achieved—under devotion to a common truth, a common cause, and to goals accepted as spiritually mandatory. Will a new and vital spiritual inspiration seize hold of humanity and bestow upon it the mind and will to live more nobly? The Baha'is believe so. They dedicate their lives and all their abilities to this great goal—of a spiritualized humanity bonded together in love and harmony, building noble institutions within the pattern of a federated global society.

As the cutting edge of science moves deeper into the nature of matter and the cosmos, physicists are not reminded of the soulless machine to which biologists would reduce the living organism. The cosmos, rather, reminds them of a living organism with a directed evolutionary development. The evolution of the universe and of our life in it has been seen to be critically dependent on fifteen or more universal constants. Even slight deviations from their numerical values would have resulted in a completely different universe or no universe at all. Many physicists have commented on how finely tuned our universe is to produce life, and they have pointed to the staggering improbability of the universe developing in the way that it has. Some have suggested that an anthropomorphic principle, a principle of intelligent creation and design, must be at work, creating universe in order to create life. This suggestion has many versions, and has received much criticism for not advancing scientific understanding, but it has been made and discussed by such eminent physicists as Stephen Hawking, J. Wheeler and Fred Hoyle, as well as many others. It is frequently commented on in summaries of current theories of the Big Bang.

The indeterminacy principle of quantum mechanics and the principle of complementarity that it requires physics to employ have suggested a wider complementarity. The original scientific revolution inspired us to seek one determinate way of describing our world and ourselves. But if physics has now had to abandon this ambition, and finds greater explanatory power in the acceptance of seemingly contradictory dualities, then perhaps, we may seek wisdom in a greater tolerance of such dualities elsewhere. There may be a truth to be found in reducing organisms to the mechanical parts that make them up; but there may also be a truth in the position that insists that the whole organism is greater than the sum of its parts. The greatest truth is perhaps, to be found in accepting each of these approaches as an aspect of what it is to understand life. This may be the spirit in which we should approach the apparent contradictions between individual and society, between competition and co-operation, between the material and the immaterial. The rejection of the old spirit of conflict between science and religion may be best summed up by this pithy remark of Albert Einstein:

“Religion without science is blind. Science without religion is lame.”<sup>9</sup>

These two sources of knowledge and wisdom are like our two eyes, left and right. Cover either one, and the picture we receive of reality is a two dimensional distortion. Use them together in

harmony, and we see the world in perspective. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, who has somehow been able to see what science can now confirm, has taught us what the third dimension is that science and religion together will show us—it is a universal and lasting peace.

### **REFERENCES**

1. The word “profane” has other meanings namely “not sacred; irreverent, blasphemous, or obscene; secular or worldly, not religious.
2. This and the next five paragraphs are extracts from the Baha’i document, pages 8-10, Science, Religion and Development-A Backgrounder to the Colloquium on Science, Religion and Development prepared by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, New York, hosted in New Delhi, 21-24 November 2000.
3. Baha’u’llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, Wilmette, Illinois, U.S.A., Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1953, p. 26-27.
4. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, Cited in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow-A Ray of Hope for Everyone* by Stanwood Cobb, New Delhi, Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1970, p. 57.
5. Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, New Delhi, Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1973.
6. ‘Abdu’l-Baha, Cited in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *op. cit.* p. 58.
7. Sarton, George, Cited in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *op. cit.* p. 59.
8. Baha’u’llah, Cited in *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, *op. cit.* p. 60.
9. Einstein, Albert, *Ideas and Opinions*, London, Souvenir Press, 1973, p. 46.