

# The Birth of the Human Being: Beyond Religious Traditionalism and Materialist Modernity

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According to the worldview of the Bahá'í Faith we have arrived at a turning point in the evolution of human history. This turning point is primarily the moment of the *birth of the human being*. In this paper I will first define what I mean by “the birth of the human being” and its opposite concept, namely, the logic of dehumanization. Then I will trace the development of this idea in the Writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

## THE BIRTH OF THE HUMAN BEING

Human history so far has been primarily a history of dehumanization. We humans have perceived neither others nor ourselves as human beings and therefore we have treated each other as objects and animals. Dehumanization is the process through which human beings are reduced to the level of nature, objects, and physical bodies. Humans as humans, however, are defined by their consciousness, their reason, their spiritual powers and perfections.

We can begin our discussion by referring to two symbols of the birth of the human being. The first is the ancient symbol of Egyptian culture, the sphinx. This enigmatic symbol has been interpreted in various ways. But from a dialectical perspective, the sphinx represents the meaning and

purpose of human history. The sphinx denotes a being whose body is an animal while his face is human. In other words, the purpose of history is the emergence of the human being out of the realm of nature.<sup>1</sup> The human being is a natural being which is the vehicle for the realization of consciousness, spirit, and moral attributes. The emergence of a human face—symbolizing reason and spirit—out of the physical and biological background of humans is the emergence of the truth of the human being. Unfortunately, throughout history we have treated humans not as beings with a “human face” but rather as natural, biological, and animal beings.

The second symbol is a modern principle formulated in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. He presents a new definition of the human being and further elaborates on that definition by discussing the true basis of human honor, morality, and identity:

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. In another passage He hath proclaimed: It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens. (*Tablets* 167)

In this statement Bahá'u'lláh identifies the human being as one who is characterized not by the will to domination but by dedication to the universal interests of the entire human race. Universalistic orientation of service is the defining feature of the human being. In this statement, a social and political interpretation of Darwinism which finds human society a jungle of struggle for existence is replaced by a consciousness of the oneness of humanity, an attitude of service to all human beings, and a morality that is not based upon naturalistic ties of kinship, blood, or habit. That is why Bahá'u'lláh immediately identifies a new sense of morality.

According to Durkheim, the boundary of morality is the boundary of the social group. Human beings identify themselves collectively in terms of their own group and follow a moral double standard in their behavior

towards insiders and outsiders. People outside the group become strangers, objects, and enemies whose domination, enslavement, plunder, and murder are perceived as heroic moral acts. In fact, the premodern definition of human beings was primarily based upon such a conception of humans as members of specific communities and their sense of natural belongingness to the group. However, this “social belongingness” was based upon naturalistic feelings, ties of kinship, and habits of everyday interaction. Such a naturalistic morality was a pact of collective violence against other groups. Rejecting that premodern definition of the human being, Bahá'u'lláh proposes a new sense of morality and honor based upon the universal and rational concept of humanity. We now leave the realm of natural feelings and enter the realm of spirit. Honor is not for the one who loves his own country but rather for the one who loves the entire human race. Such a novel framework requires a new conception of identity, in which human beings are not defined in terms of opposition to others but instead by their mutual interdependence and symbiosis. The entire planet Earth becomes the home and neighborhood of a person: the earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.

An investigation of various forms of oppression in human history demonstrates that most forms of oppression are products of the reduction of human beings to the level of nature—treating them as objects and animals. For example, the caste system in India has been an extreme form of the culture of class and status inequality that has existed almost everywhere on this planet. The caste system reduces humans to the level of their natural and biological characteristics. The rights, value, and opportunities of a human are defined by the biological accident of one's family of birth. The fact that a person is born within a particular family is the sole determinant of the person's identity, truth, and worth. What is missing in the caste system is the consciousness of the human being as a spiritual being, with consciousness and reason. Likewise, any society in which the destiny of individuals is strongly determined by the class position of the parent is by definition a dehumanizing society. In such a society, individuals are not treated according to their human characteristics, but rather they are predestined to occupy specific social roles on the basis of their birth family.

Racism is another form of this dehumanization. Racism is primarily a form of culture and consciousness which reduces the value, identity, and social rights of a human being to the color of that person's skin. Racist consciousness is impossible without the reduction of humans to the level of nature, biology, and physical attributes.

Patriarchy is another universal form of dehumanization. It is ultimately a systematic culture of dehumanization where the value, worth, and the rights of human beings are determined by their specific biological features as male or female. Patriarchy means a systematic inability to recognize humans as human beings, as spirit, as consciousness, as spiritual powers.

One other extreme form of dehumanization is slavery. The institution of slavery, which has existed systematically both in the West and in the East, is nothing but a reduction of the human being to the level of an object. The human being becomes an object devoid of will and consciousness which can be owned and treated without his or her consent, simply by the will of the slave owner. This is an extreme form of the type of the relationship that Martin Buber calls the "I-It relationship."

There are, however, many forms of the dehumanization process that are so habituated and ingrained in the consciousness of people that their dehumanizing logic is hardly perceived. The most influential of these institutionalized forms of the reduction of humans to the level of objects is the most powerful basis of identity in the modern world, namely, nationalism. The modern nation-state has brought with it a conception of national citizenship that assigns certain rights to individual members of the nation-state and treats them as persons endowed with rights. In this sense, nationalism may seem to be a force of humanization. However, while such national citizenship has become a force of entitlement to rights, it has also become a force of exclusion of rights.

Sociology, which is my area of study, has always been interested in studying forms of inequality and oppression. However, due to its nineteenth-century legacy, sociology usually identifies society with the nation-state. Therefore social theory has become primarily a study of nation-states, ignoring the relations among these nations. Consequently sociology has been preoccupied with explaining oppression in terms of class, gender,

and ethnic inequalities. The problem with this approach is that in our globalized world the most important basis of social inequality for human beings is national citizenship. Citizenship—and not the class position or ethnicity or sex of a person—is the most powerful and effective predictor of the life chances of a person today. If a child, by mere accident, is born in a rich country, he or she is entitled to various rights, which will define the prospects of access to the resources of the world for that child. However, if a child, again by a pure and ethically meaningless natural accident, is born in a poor country, that child will be deprived of access to various resources and may never have an opportunity to escape poverty. Nationalism, in other words, reduces humans to their place of birth and defines their rights in terms of such a naturalistic variable. However, this fundamental basis of inequality, exclusion, discrimination, and oppression is considered by humanity as just, normal, and natural. In fact, it is the biggest hypocrisy of modern humanity that it talks of inalienable human rights and yet simultaneously considers the nationalistic exclusion of rights and opportunities on the basis of citizenship as normal, natural, and just.

From a Bahá'í point of view, the truth of all religions is the rejection of a culture of dehumanization. The followers of past religions, however, have usually failed to understand their own spiritual truth, and therefore their history was degraded to another experience of dehumanization.

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was released from prison one hundred years ago, He traveled to Egypt, Europe, and the United States to bring this message of humanization to various parts of the East and the West. In His lectures He frequently emphasized a new interpretation of an old religious idea. 'Abdu'l-Bahá often referred to the passage at the beginning of the Torah in which God declares that He has created humans "in our image" (Gen. 1:26). This biblical statement is accepted and confirmed in both Christianity and Islam. However, the progressive nature of this foundational statement was only unveiled by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. According to Him, the idea that humans are made in the image of God is a call for rejection of all forms of dehumanization. For example, can a person who really believes in this statement also believe in patriarchy and consider men to be superior to women? The answer is a categorical no. The reason is that

according to this statement the identity and truth of humans is defined by their spiritual nature, the fact that humans are in the image of God. Patriarchy reduces the rights, value, and social position of human beings to their biological and reproductive characteristics. This move can only make sense if we believe that God is a body, and that He is either male or female. It is of course clear that God is defined precisely by His transcendence from any of these physical and natural characteristics. Therefore if one believes in the biblical statement, he or she must necessarily find patriarchy inconsistent with the truth of the human being since we are defined as the image of God and not merely as a material, biological, or physical object. The same is true of racism, the caste system, and slavery. The fact is that it appears that the history of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim nations has frequently been a rejection of this central tenet of their own belief. 'Abdu'l-Bahá invited both the people of the West and the people of the East to recognize the truth of their belief and act accordingly. Addressing the inconsistency of racism and a spiritual definition of human beings, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said:

According to the words of the Old Testament God has said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." This indicates that man is of the image and likeness of God. . . .

Let us now discover more specifically how he is the image and likeness of God and what is the standard or criterion by which he can be measured and estimated. This standard can be no other than the divine virtues which are revealed in him. . . . Can we apply the test of racial color and say that man of a certain hue—white, black, brown, yellow, red—is the true image of his Creator? We must conclude that color is not the standard and estimate of judgment and that it is of no importance, for color is accidental in nature. The spirit and intelligence of man is essential, and that is the manifestation of divine virtues, the merciful bestowals of God, the eternal life and baptism through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, be it known that color or race is of no importance. . . . Man is not man simply because of bodily attributes. The standard of divine measure and judgment is his intelligence and spirit. (*Promulgation* 70)

The biblical statement is ultimately an affirmation of a consciousness which defines the human being as not a mere material, natural, biological, or physical being but instead as primarily a spiritual being.

#### THE BIRTH OF THE HUMAN BEING IN THE WRITINGS OF THE BÁB

The foundation of the concept of the birth of the human being was laid in the Writings of the Báb. In this paper I shall discuss only three examples of this new conceptual orientation in the Mission and Writings of the Báb. The first is related to both the Declaration and the Martyrdom of the Báb. The idea of the birth of the human being is, in my judgment, the essence of all Bahá'í ideas. Yet it may be useful to trace this concept to the very first night in which this new spiritual culture began. This is the night of the Declaration of the Báb. On this night, a new conception of religion and revelation is offered by the young merchant of Shiraz.

Traditionally religion was perceived as a monologue from God to humanity. Revelation was an arbitrary imposition of divine will, a will which had nothing to do with the development of humanity and history, and therefore it was unchangeable. Thus the beginning of religion was identified as the time when the Prophet becomes conscious of his prophethood, a dialogue between God and his Prophet. However, the night of the inception of the new Faith is different. According to the Báb, this was not the night that He became conscious of His prophetic mission. That had happened earlier, but the event did not mark the initiation of the new religion.<sup>2</sup> The new religion, instead, marks its inception when a dialogue takes place between God and humanity. God, through His Prophet, speaks with a human being (Mullá Ḥusayn) who has become ready to receive His message and thus becomes his first believer. This means that revelation is not an arbitrary despotic will of God imposed upon human objects. Rather revelation is a process which takes place between God and humanity.

God's revelation is defined in terms of the needs and stage of development of humanity, and therefore revelation is always a dynamic interactive process, meaning that there will never be a final revelation. Here human beings appear as spiritual beings who participate in the creation of religion. Religion is a means of the advancement of humanity and not a

static, arbitrary, and unchangeable imposition upon them. The very beginning of the Cause of the Báb represents the realization of a dialogical logic in which the human being appears as the image of God. Such a dialogical approach constitutes the essence of the new spiritual culture.

This same logic is visible even in the martyrdom of the Báb. Unlike in previous Dispensations, the Báb decides to be martyred together with one of His believers. Therefore, the martyrdom of the Báb represents a moment in which the body of the Báb and the body of one of His believers become indiscriminately united, when He appears in the body of His disciple. The night before the martyrdom, the will of His believer is already annihilated in the will of the Báb, and the moment of physical martyrdom is the realization of that same unity of the will in a physical way. The martyrdom of the Báb is not the negation or silencing of the Báb. Rather it is the supreme proclamation of His truth in the form of the birth of a new race of humanity which represents spiritual perfections as the image of God.

A second example is reflected in the Báb's profound principle that the supreme evidence of the truth of the Manifestation of God is not a natural phenomenon; rather, it is an act of spirit. Therefore, unlike the naturalistic and traditional conception of miracles as the proof of the presence of the divine, for the Báb the supreme miracle of God belongs to the realm of spirit; namely, it is the Word, the new worldview and the novel culture that signifies the presence of God. Thus it is the Word, consciousness, and reason that define the purpose and function of religion. But as we saw before, the revelation of the Word is not a monologue of God directed to a human object. Instead it is a supreme dialogue that recognizes humanity as partners in religion. That is why the supreme evidence of the truth of divine revelation becomes the divine Word, namely, that which has to be appropriated, understood, interpreted, and recognized by human consciousness.

Finally, the Báb defines the historic night of His Declaration as the night of Resurrection. In this way the Báb radically transforms the traditional idea of "resurrection." Prior to the Báb, the idea of resurrection turned into another form of dehumanization of humans. The final destiny



of humans, which defines their true identity and perfection and constitutes their final reward, is heaven. Yet the followers of previous religions misunderstood the metaphors of their scriptures in a literal way. The result was a consciousness that defined the ultimate reward of human beings as incessant objectifying sex without love and an infinite hedonism of insatiable consumption without work and creativity. This ultimate abject reduction of humans to the level of animals was understood as the final realization of the truth, destiny, and perfection of human nature.

In addition, the traditional conception of the Day of Resurrection is a thesis of the end of history—another strategy that deprives human beings of their humanity. The Báb argued differently. Heaven becomes a new stage of the ever-advancing march of human spiritual advancement. It is the discovery of the new values and spiritual culture that defines the Resurrection of the past culture. Human are defined as spirit, as spiritual capacities, and their heaven is also inseparable from this spiritual process. Heaven is a process of the realization of our spiritual potentialities, and that is the true meaning of attaining the presence of God. It is amazing that the Báb extended the idea of heaven and hell to not only humans but to all beings. The heaven of anything is the stage of the realization of its potentialities. Hell is its deprivation from such a realization. All things have the right to attain their paradise and it is the duty of humans to ensure that all beings, to the extent possible, achieve their heaven.<sup>3</sup> Human transcendence from nature, in other words, becomes the very process of protecting the sanctity of nature and preserving the environment as well.

#### THE BIRTH OF THE HUMAN BEING IN THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ'U'LLÁH

The most complex and explicit affirmation of the birth of the human being is found in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. It is obvious that the main source of almost all the major problems that have afflicted human beings is the conscious or unconscious reduction of human beings to the level of nature, body, objects, and instruments. Defining humans in terms of spirit, reason, love, and other spiritual attributes requires a perspective that consists of three principles. First is a spiritual definition of human beings,

refusing to reduce humans to the level of nature or biology. Second, such a spiritual definition of the human must understand the human as a historical being, refusing to reduce it to a naturalistic logic of traditionalism. Finally, defining humans as reason and spirit requires a dialogical understanding of human spirit, refusing to reduce humans to the natural level of the struggle for existence.

These three principles of a humanizing worldview correspond to the three central principles of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. As I have discussed in much detail in *Logos and Civilization*, these three principles constitute the chronology of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. In His earlier Writings in Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh employs the language and categories of mysticism to emphasize a spiritual approach to human reality. In the second stage of His Writings, which begins in the later Baghdad period and continues in Istanbul and Adrianople, Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the principle of historical consciousness, defining humans as a dynamic and progressive reality that participates in the construction of an ever-advancing civilization. Bahá'u'lláh's critique of traditionalism, including religious traditionalism, is the center of His historic Text, the Book of Certitude. Finally, in the last stage of His Writings, which begins in the late Adrianople period, Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes the principle of the unity of humankind. Here, humans are defined in a dialogical way, where consultation and unity in diversity become the ultimate realization of human reality.

The first condition of the birth of the human being is therefore a spiritual definition of human reality. The birth of the human being requires a transformation in all aspects of culture and a revaluation of all values. Both the cultures of the East and the West need to be revolutionized and transformed in a way that makes them compatible with a human culture, a culture of humanization. That is why this concept of the birth of the human being is neither the same as the Western materialistic conception of modernity, nor it is compatible with a traditionalistic approach to religion. These two opposites in fact are very similar to each other. Both are expressions of a dehumanization process. In our current political disputes, Western materialism and Eastern religious traditionalism define themselves in terms of the negation of the other. Eastern religious traditionalism

points to the history of colonialism by Western modernity and legitimizes its repressive fanaticism through the negation of colonialism. Western materialism celebrates its materialistic rationality by opposing itself to the abhorrent violence against all the basic principles of human rights that is committed by Eastern religious fanaticism. What both theories ignore is the fact that both perspectives share a fundamental principle in common, which is the reduction of human beings to the level of nature. Bahá'u'lláh's critique of materialism is therefore simultaneously a critique of Western militaristic modernity and Eastern religious fanaticism which reduces God and religion to an instrument of particularism, discrimination, violence, and suppression of freedom of conscience.

Both Western modernity and Eastern spirituality contain sublime principles that refer to a culture of humanization. Modernity recognized the dignity of the human being as a rational being and dedicated itself to creating a social order based upon reason. This was a noble project since it understood the truth of the human being as spirit and consciousness. Eastern religious traditions are also based upon a fundamental belief in the spiritual nature of human beings. This mystical world-view is the essence of the humanization project and a call for the birth of the human being. Both Western modernity and Eastern religiosity must be reconstructed in terms of these noble principles inherent in them. But this also requires a fundamental refutation of both the materialistic aspect of modernity as well as traditionalistic and repressive definitions of religion.

The fundamental teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, those that are usually called "the twelve principles"—which are in fact at least sixteen—aim at this reconstruction and reinterpretation of both religion and modernity. Some of these principles directly address the critique of religious traditionalism. The unity of all religions, progressive revelation, the agreement of faith and reason, the elimination of prejudice, the independent investigation of truth, universal education, the equality of men and women, and most importantly the idea that religion must be a cause of unity and peace otherwise irreligion is superior to religiosity, all directly challenge traditional conceptions of religion. Some others directly challenge the materialist

logic of modernity. The idea of universal peace, the critique of nationalism, the principle of the oneness of humanity, humanity's need for spiritual education, the imperative of economic justice, the elimination of all kinds of prejudice, the equality of men and women, the notion of a universal auxiliary language, and the principle of human rights directly address the question of modernity and call for a modernity that is based upon the birth of the human being as a human being.

One of the key concepts of the Bahá'í Faith which directly challenges both religious and materialistic forms of dehumanization is the equation of spirituality with universalism. In the Writings of both the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh the essence of ethics is defined as a process of spiritualization, a process in which human beings become mirrors of God, reflecting divine attributes in their sentiments and behaviors. 'Abdu'l-Bahá defines the same process as following the "politics of God," a type of policy that is qualitatively different from the normal sense of "politics." The defining feature of this divine politics is its universalism. God has created all, loves all, nurtures all, and is merciful to all. His rain showers upon everyone, His sun shines upon all, His earth provides sustenance to all. Human politics must follow the same principle of universalism, follow divine politics, and aim at the realization of the universal interests of humankind.

This same principle was the basis of Bahá'u'lláh's advice to the political and religious leaders of the world, calling them to strive to serve the interests of all human beings, to bring peace, justice, and unity to the world. But perhaps the most striking expression of this same principle is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's frequent statement that whatever is "universal" is "divine." In a talk on the occasion of Naw-Rúz, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that the philanthropic acts of humanity have usually been restricted to a particular group of human beings. But in this age, because it is the age of the manifestation of the divine name the All-Merciful, good deeds are those deeds which aim to benefit the entire human race since all that is universal is divine.<sup>4</sup>

The history of Western modernity has unfortunately been frequently one of dehumanization and particularism. While Western modernity recognized in abstract ways the dignity of all human beings, it was system-

atically a history of particularism, colonialism, racism, violence, patriarchy, and militarism. The result of such a materialistic culture has been consumerism, obsession with the body, destruction of the environment, extremes of militarism, nationalistic racism, and a glorification of the culture of struggle for existence where human beings are defined as either mere means or as obstacles to the realization of the narcissistic desire for pleasure, material accumulation, and power. Bahá'u'lláh warned the West in the nineteenth century of this distorted nature of material civilization. He argued that Western material culture is not balanced by dedication to universalistic values that are inherent in a spiritual definition of human beings. The result, He said, is a civilization out of moderation, which necessarily becomes militaristic. Militarism was for Bahá'u'lláh the logical consequence of a form of modernity which is particularistic and reduces humans to the level of nature and material being.

With the emergence of the Darwinian model, a broad logic of social Darwinism became the guiding perspective for defining human beings in the two dominant institutions of modernity, namely capitalism and nationalism. Competition and pursuit of self-interest became the leading principle of human behavior in the market. Yet the same principle glorified the nation-state as the defining unit of international relations where a state of nature is dominant. It was, again, a worldview of reducing humans to the level of nature. In nature, the struggle for existence means a war of all against all. Modernity's conception, whether in its glorification of pure capitalism or an extreme form of nationalism, where both the individual and state are left to the logic of mere self-help surrounded by hostile and threatening rivals and enemies, became a cult of militarism and estrangement.

But rejection of the dehumanizing aspects of Western modernity does not mean a celebration of the prevalent forms of Eastern religious traditionalism. When we look at the dominant forms of that religious traditionalism, we witness a tragic paradox. Religion by its nature is an affirmation of the spiritual nature of human beings and a call to end the reduction of humans to the level of material and natural objects. Yet paradoxically the way religion has often been understood and practiced by its fol-

lowers has been the very opposite of religion and godliness. Religious traditionalism has been primarily a strategy of dehumanization, a strategy of turning humans into strangers and enemies of each other, legitimizing slavery of unbelievers, violence and discrimination against women, and discrimination regarding the rights of humans in terms of their religious identification. Existing religions have frequently become a breeding ground for hate, violence, discrimination, and estrangement. Members of religious groups frequently find each other dirty, ritually impure, and polluted; avoid communication and friendship with other religious groups; and legitimize discrimination, censorship, and patriarchy. In essence, a main function of traditionalistic religions has become the reduction of the human reality to the level of nature, where struggle for existence rules, where hatred and violence is a divinely sanctioned virtue, and where other human beings are strangers and enemies who should be subjugated, silenced, and even forced into extinction.

This is perhaps the most perplexing phenomenon of religious history. The purpose of religion is to curb the natural and violent aspects of human nature and to encourage humans to turn toward their spiritual truth, where one can see all others as spiritual beings, as mirrors of God, as sacred and beautiful, and as endowed with equal rights. Yet in the name of God and spiritual dedication the vilest and most sadistic, ignorant, and particularistic aspects of our low nature have been encouraged. One extreme form of this religious dehumanization is the law of apostasy (*irtidád*).

The law of apostasy was practiced in medieval times by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike but is nowadays confined to some of the countries that call themselves Islamic. According to this law if one is born in a Muslim family and then decides to change his religion, he or she should be killed. In other words, using one's reason and consciousness becomes the ultimate crime that is punishable by death. Religion is degraded into a naturalistic and physical quality. Not only is freedom of conscience not recognized, but it becomes the ultimate sin. The law of apostasy turns humans into natural objects, dehumanizes them, and becomes a violent rejection of their dignity of self-determination through

the exercise of their own reason. In the name of God and spirituality we witness the ultimate de-spiritualization and dehumanization of humans.

Therefore the worldview of the Bahá'í Faith has radically reinterpreted both conceptions of religion and modernity. Defining human beings as spiritual beings, as mirrors of the divine, becomes a rejection of the culture of discrimination and estrangement, and affirms the institutionalization of dialogue and consultation dedicated to realizing the universal interests of the human race.

The second condition of defining humans as humans is the affirmation of historical consciousness. According to this view, the spiritual character of the human being necessarily leads to a dynamic and self-creative human life. Being a spirit, reason, and consciousness we humans are not static objects determined by external nature. Consciousness implies perpetual change, self-determination, freedom, deliberation, and advancement. It is curious that Darwin's emphasis on the biological evolution of humankind appears at the same time that Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Certitude emphasizes the concept of evolution in the spiritual history of humanity. Although both perspectives emphasize evolution and change, Bahá'u'lláh deduces evolution and dynamism of human history from the spiritual nature of the human being. It is not our biology or material character which makes us a reality that is characterized by culture and history. Rather, it is our spiritual nature that brings history, dynamism, and cultural change to our life. Bahá'u'lláh emphasizes evolution and historical consciousness not by reducing humans to their biological nature but rather by liberating humans from all forms of materialistic and naturalistic reductionism.

The opposite of historical consciousness is the ideology of traditionalism. This ideology is a cult of dehumanization. Humans become static things who are not defined by their deliberative consciousness and choice, but rather by their blind habituation and worship of the past. This traditionalism can take a religious or nonreligious form. The religious form of traditionalism defines the laws of past religions as eternally binding on all human beings. Religion, in such a perspective, becomes the enemy of history, progress, creativity, reason, and humanity. The result is that any change is considered a violation of the divine will. Thus all religions

become the final religion and in all, the laws become unchangeable till the Last Day. Traditionalism justified by the will of God becomes a potent force for a reactionary orientation and enmity toward progress and social justice. That is why Bahá'u'lláh's emphasis on historical consciousness takes the form of the doctrine of progressive revelation, a radical expression of historicity where the principle of dynamic change is not only applied to the realm of human institutions but also to the realm of divine revelation.

Our intellectual world is a world of chaos and confusion. We witness the undecided and ongoing battle among the three contending perspectives of premodernity or traditionalism, modernity or rationalism, and post-modernity or cultural relativism. The birth of the human being requires a reevaluation of all these three perspectives. Premodern culture is a culture of traditionalism, where human behavior and social reality must be governed not by human decision and reason but rather by the laws of nature, fixed in the form of traditions, usually based upon biological characteristics such as age, sex, family, clan, ethnicity, or national birth. Max Weber calls this form of authority "traditional authority," where laws are inferred from the realm of nature, and thus are fixed and unchangeable. Not only are humans reduced to the level of nature in this culture, but in addition humans are ossified; they become natural objects which are fixed and unchangeable, part of the natural order. The idea that humans are defined not by nature but by culture, that humans are not mere natural beings but conscious and rational realities who create their environment and legislate their own laws, is absent from the worldview of traditionalism.

It was partly in response to this degradation and dehumanization that modernity revolted against traditionalism. Modernity defined humans as rational beings, and this meant that society must be constructed on the basis of reason. As Max Weber notes, the opposite of traditional authority becomes legal-rational authority, meaning that laws are not a natural phenomenon but rather something that is decided and legislated by the human mind. Modernity's rejection of traditionalism, therefore, was a project of emancipating humans from the bondage of nature. Unfortunately, although Western modernity defined human beings as rational,



and glorified the concept of reason, it led to ideas and practices that are the exact opposite of the dignity of human beings. Colonialism, racism, patriarchy, consumerism, selfishness, and militarism are just a few examples of modern forms of dehumanization.

It was partly a response to this phenomenon that led Western philosophers increasingly to reject modernism and adopt postmodernism. Postmodernism rejected the idea of reason and replaced it with the value of diversity and difference. Unlike the claims of rationalism, postmodernism supported cultural and moral relativism, rejecting all universalism. According to that view, there is no such thing as universal human rights. Good and bad are defined through cultures and traditions, while cultures themselves cannot be judged in terms of a higher or universal principle. Thus ultimately the only criterion of good and bad becomes nothing but the existing culture and tradition. Ironically postmodern culture returns to the same worship of tradition that was dominant in premodern traditionalism. Yet the postmodern worldview is self-contradictory. Although it refuses to accept any universal principle of morality, it supports the equal right of all cultures and traditions. Yet this relativism is fundamentally inconsistent with the very idea of diversity, for in such relativism a racist culture is just as good as a humanist culture, and a culture practicing genocide in the name of tribe, God, or nation is just as legitimate as a culture valuing human rights.

From a Bahá'í point of view the birth of the human being requires going beyond all these three ideas of premodernism, modernism, and postmodernism. The crucial missing link in both Eastern religious traditionalism and Western materialistic modernity is the absence of the third condition of the definition of humans as humans, in other words, the dialogical definition of human beings. Western modernity usually reduced the concept of reason to a strategy of selfishness where consciousness becomes a private island separate from others. In this view, other human beings, like natural objects, become instruments for the realization of one's own selfish ends. The same is true with religious traditionalism, an ideology which separates different types of human beings and legitimizes discrimination of rights, violence, and depriving people

of their most fundamental element of their humanity, namely their freedom of conscience.

The key to this puzzle lies in the concept of rationality. Modernity was correct to reject traditionalism and its dehumanizing tendencies. But unfortunately, reason, in the modern definition, became nothing but a petty calculus of selfishness. Rationality was defined as the use of efficient means to realize one's selfish interests. In other words, materialistic modernity defined the essence of humans as nothing but another form of struggle for existence. Reason became an efficient technique which was a mere servant of our natural desires. Other human beings once again became enemies or instruments to be used for our own gain. It is no wonder that this rationalism became a justification for particularism, militarism, consumerism, colonialism, and destruction of the environment. But the response of postmodernity to this problem is equally misguided. Postmodernity completes the task of the estrangement of all humans from all humans, all cultures from all cultures, and destroys the possibility of communication, dialogue, and mutual understanding. Such a world becomes necessarily another arena of struggle for existence.

The solution is a new definition of reason. Humans as spiritual beings are defined by reason and consciousness, but this reason is defined by its universalism and transcendence from all forms of particularism. Reason in its true nature becomes a force that transcends the boundaries of space and time, and rediscovers the identity and unity of all human beings as spirit. In this definition of reason, humans rise above the realm of nature and discover the truth of reality. Reason, in other words, becomes the very strategy of humanization, an affirmation of the culture of the oneness of humanity, a discovery of the intrinsic beauty and sacredness of humans and all beings.

This new definition of reason corresponds with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all beings. The ultimate truth of all things is their mutual interdependence or love. He defined love as the necessary relations arising from the nature of things. Yet He defined religion in the same way. In addition He defined nature and knowledge in the same manner. The truth of nature, reason, religion, and love are one and the same

thing, and that is the necessary relations among things, relations that are not accidental to the truth of things, rather the essential outcome of the mutual interdependence of all things. Applied to the realm of humanity, this idea takes the form of the principle of the oneness of humanity. In such a perspective, reason is defined in terms of the unity in diversity of all human beings. True rationality takes the form of a dialogue between human beings, a dialogue based upon the recognition of the essential unity of all.

Two main examples of Bahá'u'lláh's radical reinterpretation of reason as a dialogical and intersubjective reality are particularly revealing. First, Bahá'u'lláh defines the perfection and maturity of reason as consultation. In an untranslated statement Bahá'u'lláh affirms that for everything there is a station of perfection and maturity and that the maturity and manifestation of reason is realized through consultation.<sup>5</sup> In other words, true rationality is nothing but consultation. That is why the unity of humanity, justice, and peace are all inseparable from the principle of consultation.

The second example is found in Bahá'u'lláh's identification of reason (wisdom) with the maturation of humanity and His identification of the signs and characteristics of this stage of the rationalization of society. First He identifies the sign of the appearance of reason among the people as the emergence of a culture in which the desire for domination is replaced with the desire for universalistic service. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh: "The fact that you see some people exhibit delight in worldly power, and pride themselves in earthly eminence is due to their heedlessness. . . . One of the signs of the maturity of the world is that no one will accept to bear the weight of kingship. Kingship will remain with none willing to bear alone its weight. That day will be the day whereon wisdom [*'aql*] will be manifested among mankind" (*Majmú'iy-i-Alwáh-i-Mubárahik*, 125–26).

It is interesting that Bahá'u'lláh identifies another sign of the maturation and rationalization of humanity as the institutionalization of a universal auxiliary language (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* par. 189). The Word, which was the main evidence of the presence of God in the Writings of the Báb, becomes

a social institution that binds humanity together. Such a universal language is the ultimate expression of the dialogical character of reason. Modern social theory and philosophy has clearly confirmed the accuracy of the dialogical concept of reason. It is true that Descartes' statement "I think therefore I am" was a revolutionary and progressive statement that defined humans as consciousness and rejected the particularistic reduction of humans to their naturalistic groups, traditions, and attachments. Yet the Cartesian project reduced consciousness to a mere subjective island isolated from other beings. The result was an unconscious identification of consciousness with one's particular and separate body, turning reason into a mere slave of the selfish passions of the individual.

However, social theory has made it clear that consciousness is inseparable from language, presupposing an intersubjective process of dialogue among human beings. George Herbert Mead's theory, for example, discusses the dynamics of the development of consciousness through the successive stages of play, game, and Generalized Other. We learn to take the attitudes and roles of others, put ourselves in the position of others, and internalize others within so that we can engage in an internal dialogue between I and Me, the latter representing the internalized other. The decisive expression of this development of consciousness is of course none other than language. But language presupposes the intersubjective agreement of a group of human beings. Consciousness therefore is fundamentally an intersubjective and dialogical process where the being of others is presupposed in the very being of the individual's consciousness. We think through language, through symbols that humans have created. Language is the realm of spirit where we transcend the domain of natural objects and engage in a world that is created by the spirit. But this creation by its very nature is a dialogical process. Yet Bahá'u'lláh goes even one step further. The advent of reason among human beings is defined not simply in terms of language but in terms of a universal language. The true realization of reason is the realization of a culture of universal communication and concord among the human race.

This dialogical perspective which identifies spirituality with universality and love represents a culture in which nationalistic militarism, exces-

sive social inequality, various forms of prejudice and particularism, and religious fanaticism are transformed into a culture of the oneness of humanity, universal peace, justice, and human rights.

#### THE BIRTH OF THE HUMAN BEING IN THE WRITINGS OF 'ABDU'L-BAHÁ

The maturation of humanity, an affirmation of the culture of unity and communication, is the realization of true freedom. Obviously the question of freedom is inseparable from the definition of human beings and their spiritual birth. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has offered a unique theory of freedom and true liberty. His theory, however, is rooted in Bahá'u'lláh's conception of true liberty. While in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* Bahá'u'lláh criticizes the libertarian and materialist doctrine of hedonistic liberty, He affirms the sanctity of true liberty. However, in one of His Tablets He defines the realization of true liberty in terms of a universalistic culture of identity. He refers to His famous statement, "It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world" (*Gleanings* 250) and identifies the realization of that principle in people's consciousness as the fulfillment of true liberty.<sup>6</sup>

In Bahá'u'lláh's famous passage, He applies His universalistic principle to the idea of national patriotism by redefining the concept of honor and glory. True honor is realized when one's love of country is associated with one's love of the entire human race. However, if solidarity with one's nation implies a degradation of the people of other countries to the level of strangers, instruments, or enemies, this is not true honor. It is clear that Bahá'u'lláh's redefinition of patriotism is a categorical rejection of colonialism and imperialism which are based upon patriotism of national superiority, where morality is defined in the sense of pursuing the interests of one's country at the expense of others. Thorstein Veblen, the great American sociologist who wrote a book on war and peace during World War I, recognized nationalistic patriotism as a system of invidious competition among nations. Such patriotism, he argued, is antithetical to peace. Just as in the realm of market relations the search for honor is manifested in terms of invidious comparison where both leisure and waste become the

marks of economic superiority, patriotism represents the struggle for superiority among the nations. A rational society, Veblen maintained, is a society which refuses to accept such wasteful and irrational habits of thought.

In other words, for Bahá'u'lláh true freedom is realized when patriotism is redefined as the unity in diversity of all nations and cultures. Conversely, the state of nature or the anarchy of international relations with its traditionalistic logic of patriotism reduces human societies to the level of a jungle where a particularistic morality requires the exploitation, objectification, domination, and even extermination of other countries. The same universalistic logic leads Bahá'u'lláh to question the exclusionist violence of existing institutions of nationalism and replace it with the revolutionary principle that the earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.

This new definition of freedom is more explicitly discussed in the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, true freedom is the same as the emancipation of humans from the bondage of nature. True liberty and freedom is tantamount to the birth of the human being. But this liberation from nature has two aspects. The first aspect refers to human liberation from external nature. This means increasing the autonomy of human beings from natural restrictions and a progressive autonomy of humans from their immediate environment. This aspect of freedom is realized through science and technology. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently indicates, by discovering the laws of nature humans manipulate those laws and thus are freed from natural limitations. Humans are naturally bound to walk on earth but by inventing airplanes we fly over the planet.

However, this first form of freedom is not a sufficient and true realization of freedom. In fact this is the main problem with materialistic modernity. Both Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have frequently criticized the fact that science and technology have become instruments of destruction and death. Thus militarism represents a culture in which technical freedom is not accompanied by spiritual freedom. Such lack of equilibrium becomes a major threat against not only freedom but also the very existence of human race.

Therefore, true freedom is dependent not only on liberation from external nature, but it also requires human emancipation from the bondage of internal nature. This internal nature is the principle and habit of struggle for existence, perceiving human society as a jungle. Affirming this redefinition of freedom as one of the central principles of the Bahá'í Faith, '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* 316)

In this and other statements, 'Abdu'l-Bahá presents a theory in which human freedom is realized when humans have overcome their naturalistic self-alienation. The rise of human beings from the dictates of nature constitutes the true realization of human freedom. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in His Writings defines the struggle for existence as a law that is prevalent in nature. However, humans must act according to the realm of values, transcend the realm of nature, and act as spiritual beings. Animals act on the basis of the principle of struggle for existence, but their behavior is regulated by natural instincts, and the overall result of such a system is the ecological harmony of the earth. Yet humans are not regulated by instincts because they are endowed with dynamic reason. Consequently if humans act in accordance with the principle of struggle for existence, the result will be not ecological harmony but rather the extinction of life on earth through the destruction of the environment and nuclear war. Social Darwinism, defined in broad ways, represents the reduction of humans to the level of nature. A culture of peace, justice, unity, and communication, on the other hand, represents the overcoming of human self-alienation, the birth of the human being, and true freedom.

'Abdu'l-Bahá in that same Tablet addressed to the Hague Peace

Committee goes one step further and explains the cause of the bondage of humans to the law of struggle for existence. Thus reduction of humans to the level of nature is the same as a form of culture and social order that defines human identities in opposition to each other. Violence and war are necessary consequences of such culture and social order. But the real cause of the dominance of the struggle for existence among human beings is nothing but various forms of prejudice. Thus the elimination of all kinds of prejudice is the key to realizing true liberty in human society. It is by virtue of sexist, nationalistic, religious, racial, ethnic, and other forms of prejudice that humans perceive and treat each other as objects, animals, strangers, enemies, and instruments. The organic connection between the struggle for existence at the level of human beings and cultural prejudices are frequently attested by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. For example in the same Tablet quoted above He writes:

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that religious, racial, political, economic and patriotic prejudices destroy the edifice of humanity. As long as these prejudices prevail, the world of humanity will not have rest. For a period of 6,000 years history informs us about the world of humanity. During these 6,000 years the world of humanity has not been free from war, strife, murder and bloodthirstiness. In every period war has been waged in one country or another and that war was due to religious prejudice, racial prejudice, political prejudice or patriotic prejudice. It has therefore been ascertained and proved that all prejudices are destructive of the human edifice. As long as these prejudices persist, the struggle for existence must remain dominant, and bloodthirstiness and rapacity continue. Therefore, even as was the case in the past, the world of humanity cannot be saved from the darkness of nature and cannot attain illumination except through the abandonment of prejudices and the acquisition of the morals of the Kingdom. (*Selections* 313)

We can see the intimate connection between 'Abdu'l-Bahá's discussion of freedom and Bahá'u'lláh's identification of a global and universalistic



consciousness and values as true freedom. This perspective shows the limitations of both religious traditionalism and materialistic modernity. In both cases, humans are defined in particularistic and prejudicial terms. For example, religious prejudice turns human society into a jungle and reduces humans to the level of nature. Materialistic definitions of humans turn markets as well as the international system into a jungle. With the politicization of traditional religion, materialist modernity and religious traditionalism become indistinguishable in their social functions. One important common point is militarism. In fact, the Bahá'í critique of materialism is primarily a critique of violence and militarism. Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh's warnings against the violence of religious fanaticism as a world-consuming fire and His abrogation of the concept of holy war represent the same principle. Material civilization must be accompanied by a spiritual definition of human beings. Otherwise our technology makes us more powerful and destructive, but less civilized. Yet our religions must be a cause of unity and harmony, otherwise they are forms of dehumanization and de-spiritualization.

The solution to both forms of reduction of humans to the level of nature is the realization of reason. As we noted, 'Abdu'l-Bahá identifies the source of the human struggle for existence as various forms of prejudice. But in His Tablets He also identifies the ultimate source of all prejudices. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's frequent statement, the source of prejudice is the absence of independent investigation of truth in the life of human beings. Thus it is the force of habit and traditionalism that turns humans into unconscious beings who become incapable of recognizing the humanity of other human beings, thinking and feeling in universalistic terms, and acting in accordance with true justice and morality. In other words, when we refuse to think for ourselves, and imitate the current or past particularistic traditions, seeing things not through our own eyes but through the eyes of others, we are enslaved by prejudice and fall prey to social Darwinism broadly defined. On the other hand, if we use our reason, investigate truth independently, and look at things with our own eyes, we will be able to transcend particularistic categories, recognize all human beings as our equals, discover the identity and interconnectedness of all beings,

and feel and act in a communicative, consultative, and dialogical way. Bahá'u'lláh's methodological principle at the beginning of the Hidden Words, asking us to see things with our own eyes, paradoxically becomes the strategy of transcending our particular self, recognizing others, thinking in universalistic ways, and attaining truth. Reason becomes the path for uniting all human beings, a force of discovery of the unity of all humans.

The same statement of Bahá'u'lláh in the Hidden Words unveils the greatest irony of reason. On the one hand, investigation of truth affirms the unity of all human beings and discovers the spiritual solidarity of all beings. On the other hand, human independent investigation is an affirmation of human autonomy, individuality, uniqueness, independence, and qualitative difference from all others. The realization of reason requires such individuality and independence because as spirit we are free and unique, irreducible to others. Yet the exercise of this individuality is accompanied by the discovery of the common truth of all human beings. The twin principles of the independent investigation of truth and the oneness of humankind are the indispensable conditions for the birth of the human being. It may at first seem that there is a contradiction between the two principles. But there is no contradiction here. It is precisely the unity of the two principles which defines the truth of reason, freedom, and the self-realization of humanity. We must be radically independent, different, and unique while at the same time we must be united and one.

It is the principle of unity in diversity that defines the true meaning of the concept of reason and spirit in Bahá'u'lláh's perspective. Unity without diversity and uniqueness is ugly and stagnant, and diversity without unity becomes a force of estrangement, alienation, violence, and ugliness. To be human means to be radically unique and individual while at the same time discovering the radical connectedness, reciprocity, and unity of all of us. Such a perspective transcends both a postmodern concept of radical exteriority and otherness of all human beings, and the collectivist dissolution of individual humans to a social, collective, and communal uniformity, perspectives, both of which alienate humans from their humanity. It is the principle of unity in diversity—the twin principles of the oneness of

humanity and independent investigation of truth—that points to human liberation from a naturalistic struggle for existence. It is through this paradoxical culture that finally the human face can emerge out of the natural and biological background of human existence.

## NOTES

Presented at the 35th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America, San Francisco, California, 13 August 2011.

1. See, for example, Hegel 199.
2. The Báb in the Kitábu'l-Fihrist identifies the occurrence of such prophetic consciousness in the middle of the month of Rabí'i, about fifty days before His declaration.
3. See Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart* 253–57, 315–20.
4. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Majmú'iy-i-Khiṭábát* 101–3.
5. Bahá'u'lláh, in Ishráq *Khávárí* 8:60.
6. See Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization*.

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