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The Concept of Spiritual Force: Teilhardian and Bahá'í Perspectives

This paper argues i) that the concept of spiritual force constitutes an important component of both Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's thought and a Bahá'í conceptual framework and ii) that Teilhard's concept of spiritual force resonates in many noteworthy ways with the account given in Bahá'í sources.¹ I begin this line of thought by considering several historical approaches to the concept of spiritual force.

Within the Aristotelian paradigm, which dominated Western thought until modern science's advent and Islamic thought even through the lives of the central figures of the Bahá'í dispensation, nature consists of four terrestrial elements - earth, air, fire, and water.² God generates the world's various objects by ordering its elements according to his ideal purposes. Within this schema, God's immanently ordering purpose constitutes the spiritual force and the elements' separatist tendencies constitutes an opposing material force.

Within the Newtonian paradigm, material force animate three-dimensional space-time according to mechanical laws and spiritual force works upon this self-contained system by providing its design, setting it in motion, and affecting its internal behavior via the human mind or miracles. Thus, whereas the Aristotelian paradigm sees spiritual force actively ordering nature, the Newtonian paradigm approaches it as a power of external affection.

The status of spiritual force remains controversial within contemporary intellectual discourse, as natural science need not reference such phenomena in order to carry out its inquiries and many consider natural science the only source of true

¹ For other analyses of the relation between aspects of the Bahá'í Faith and the thought of Teilhard de Chardin, see Ian Kluge. "Process Philosophy and the Bahá'í Writings: An Initial Exploration."; and Wolfgang Klebel. "Unity and Progressive Revelation: Comparing Bahá'í Principles and the Basic Concepts of Teilhard de Chardin."

² Aristotle also discusses a fifth element, aether, that is the stuff of celestial objects, i.e. planets and stars. Though historically significant within the Aristotelian paradigm, this concept is not relevant for the subject under question.

knowledge. That said, the current uncertainty about what matter really is encourages many philosophers and scientists to develop systems in which natural-scientific and spiritual phenomena cohere.³ Such thinkers often organize their thought around the idea of a non-material energetic flow whose infinite potentialities crystallize into the diverse realities that populate our universe, e.g. matter, life, mind, and value. Though offering many useful insights, the danger with such systems is that they can move hastily into the details and controversies of natural-scientific theory.⁴

A different and often more productive way to approach the concept of spiritual force is to describe its operation in order to provide guidance for action. Though one may draw upon metaphysical and natural-scientific concepts in doing so, the idea is to proceed without entering into controversy on either front. Shoghi Effendi often deploys this strategy, as does Teilhard, and the two elaborate notably resonant visions in doing so.

To provide some historical context for Teilhard's thought, though a noted paleontologist and religious thinker of posthumous world renown, his legacy remains burdened by a twofold rejection by Catholic theologians and the natural-scientific community: for the theologians, he was too much concerned with the earth and finding God's spirit flowing therein; for the natural scientists, the fact that he describes his account of spiritual evolution in *The Human Phenomenon* as "scientific" seemed to blaspheme the very word.⁵ As Teilhard describes that volume, "To be properly understood, the book I present here must not be read as a metaphysical work, still less as some kind of theological essay, but solely and exclusively as a scientific study."⁶ Let us consider what Teilhard, a distinguished natural scientist in his own right, intended by this controversial remark.

³ Examples of such thinkers are Alfred North Whitehead, Charles Sanders Peirce, David Bohm, John Polkinghorne, and Keith Ward.

⁴ It is important to mention at this point that one should not read the Bahá'í Writings as containing concrete natural-scientific propositions, as the clumsier proponents of Intelligent Design often claim of the Bible. Certainly, the Writings contain insights that may inspire to natural-scientific discoveries and illumine problems within natural-scientific theory. But efforts to, for example, critique contemporary evolutionary theory by citing 'Abdu'l-Bahá ignores the embrace scientific strategy that lies at the heart of Bahá'í teaching on the harmony of science and religion.

⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. *Le Phénomène Humain*. Paris: Éditions Du Seuil, 1965; English translation: *The Human Phenomenon*. trans. Sarah Appleton-Weber. Brighton: Sussex Academic, 2003. Citations all refer to English edition.

⁶ Ibid. 1

The word “science” meant something very different in French during the 1930s (when Teilhard wrote *The Human Phenomenon*) than it did in English during the 1950s (when and where *The Human Phenomenon* was first posthumously published). For while logical empiricism and its positivistic account of science held sway within the British and American scientific communities during this latter period, two decades earlier Continental thinkers considered “science” a proper term for all rigorous intellectual endeavor. Put otherwise, something could be scientific in Teilhard’s France without being natural science.⁷ Unfortunately, Teilhard’s Anglo-American interpreters lacked this perspective and took his work as a proposed replacement for Darwinian evolutionary theory. Since then, Teilhard’s influence has been seen by scientists and philosophers as a curious remnant of public religious enthusiasm, somewhat in the same vein as Arnold Toynbee.⁸ Catholic theologians likewise remain suspicious that Teilhard’s fervor to reconcile science and religion led him from orthodoxy.

Such critiques are irrelevant for the present study, though, which is concerned neither with natural-scientific theory nor theological schema. Rather, I approach Teilhard’s work as a descriptive endeavor that draws insight from natural science and theology in order to a) trace the operations of spiritual force within cosmic evolution and b) provide guidance for those who seek to use this spiritual power to transform the world. In this, I take Teilhard at his own words: “Do not, therefore, look in these pages for an *explanation* of the world.”⁹

Teilhard’s Concept of Spiritual Force

Teilhard’s fundamental claim is that the universe develops greater spiritual capacity as it evolves increasingly complex structures and that the attractive force of what he calls the “omega point” pulls this process forward. The “omega point” is Teilhard’s way of describing divine action in non-theological terms. John Polkinghorne’s treatment

⁷ Even today I note continually this difference between the use of the term “science” in Belgium, where I am currently pursuing my doctorate, and the U.S., where I received my bachelors and masters degrees.

⁸ For example, Nietzsche scholar Walter Kaufmann wrote of Toynbee, “Toynbee’s huge success is confined to the United States where public opinion is heavily influenced by magazines.” See Walter Kaufmann. *From Shakespeare to Existentialism: Studies in Poetry, Religion, and Philosophy*. Boston: Beacon, 1959. p. 426

⁹ Teilhard, *The Human Phenomenon*, p. 1

of chaotic systems as an analogy for divine action helps clarify Teilhard's concept of the omega point. Contrary to our intuitive grasp of the term 'chaos', Polkinghorne explains that chaotic systems are neither random nor inscrutable, as they eventually converge upon a limited range of future possibilities, what theorists call the "strange attractor." He suggests that we imagine the strange attractor as a kind of active ordering information and describes divine action as a pattern of active ordering information that guides cosmic evolution towards a certain end.¹⁰ This comes quite close to what Teilhard means by the "omega point."

Teilhard goes on to describe how the spiritual force emitted from the omega point generates three layers of complexity and spiritual capacity: 1) pre-living matter; 2) non-rational biological life; and 3) rational human life. He then suggests that another layer, super-life, is currently emerging as humanity proceeds towards a united world civilization. Though Teilhard admits the futility of speculating on the particularities of super-life, he does believe that reflection upon evolution's prior course exhibits its inevitability.

He begins this reflection by noting that expanded complexity and spiritual capacity always develop through fusion and emergence. Consider pre-life: each atom is an energetic center that attracts and repels certain entities from its domain. Larger centers emerge as vast seas of atoms fuse into great cosmic bodies. Stars are the most important of these, as their cores produce an energy that fuses atoms into various elements and scatters them into space upon a star's death-explosion. In time, these elements gather around other stars in the form of planets, which, at least in the example of our earth, generates an energy that fuses elements into countless mineral substances and later, biological life. Rational life eventually springs from the growing complexity of biological life and spreads into countless particular centers of fusion - families, national, clans, tribes, economic regions, schools of thought, etc. - that drive humanity's mounting complexity and spiritual life.¹¹ Following this trajectory, the next step can only be humanity's global fusion and the emergence of its superlife.

¹⁰ John Polkinghorne. *Belief in God in an Age of Science*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1998. p. 62

¹¹ *Ibid.* 184

The problem is that our current habits of thought block recognition of this fact and hamper our dedication to bringing superlife about. As Teilhard explains, humanity long conceptualized itself as living within a world of relative proximity: time was not far from its origin, the heavens were not too distant, and our future was fairly straightforward. From the seventeenth century onwards, though, we became increasingly aware of the universe's incomprehensibly vast extension and temporal depth. Though evidently a great intellectual advance, this new understanding had the strange effect of crushing our spiritual vigor, as it made us appear insignificant beings who inhabit a purposeless universe. Teilhard describes this loss of hope in our own future as the “[s]ickness of the dead end,” and considers it a most troubling foe.¹² For we cannot pursue the strenuous work of evolution's next phase - humanity's fusion in a unified world civilization - without the kind of unwavering motivation that only unrelenting faith in the future can bring.

That said, he argues that we find much reason for faith when we adjust our gaze with his spiritual lens. If it is true that spirit operates in the world through a process of fusion and emergence and that this process animates the formation of elements, biological life, and human civilization, then humanity must serve as the basis for a further stage of spiritual evolution. And, if evolution does in fact release greater measures of spiritual capacity, then this next stage must be more, not less, personal than our current existence. Put otherwise, our nascent superlife should appear to us as a kind of higher person, the Perfect Man, who is slowly appearing within the human race by organizing us into a divine civilization that can serve as his body. Those who have eyes to see such things, Teilhard argues, will dedicate their lives to building this divine civilization.

So what will this divine civilization look like? Though Teilhard shuns hasty speculation, he does find two of its features relatively clear. First, having awoken to the essential link between progress and “[f]aith in a supremely attractive center of personality,” humanity will recognize the importance of religious knowledge and faith for individual and collective progress. Second, humanity will grasp the near equality

¹² Ibid. 160

between the rise in knowledge and increased spiritual capacity and will therefore pursue both science and religion with the utmost vigor.

Such is, in short, Teilhard's vision of humanity's future as seen through the lens of his concept of spiritual force. With this pattern in mind, let us now turn to some Bahá'í sources.

Bahá'í References to Spiritual Force

As mentioned earlier, the Aristotelian paradigm still dominated the 19th century Islamic world and the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá direct much of their writings to such readers. At the same time, they knew of naturalism's rise in the West and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in particular engages this paradigm in his later years. This increased engagement with Western thought continues during Shoghi Effendi's ministry and the current period under the Universal House of Justice, albeit in a manner that seeks to develop an altogether new way of thinking. In this way, it should not be too surprising that Teilhard's unpopular though brilliant effort to reconcile his great natural-scientific and Catholic-Aristotelian insights resulted in a concept of spiritual force that resonates with certain features of the account given in Bahá'í sources.

Concerning such sources, it is only proper to begin by taking note of several relevant passages from the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. As the Báb states, "every object is deeply stirred by the vibrating influence emanating from Thine invincible Will."¹³ From this passage, we see a) that there is a vibrating influence emanating from God's will and b) that this vibrating influence affects every object. Bahá'u'lláh confirms the same insights in a slightly different fashion by Bahá'u'lláh: "The world's equilibrium," he says, "hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System--the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed."¹⁴ Here, the vibrating influence is attributed to the new world order that is currently taking hold of human affairs and directing them towards a unified, peaceful, and

¹³ The Báb. *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*. Trans. Habib Taherzadeh and A Committee at the Bahá'í World Center. Bahá'í World Center, 1982. p. 195

¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. Trans. A Committee at the Bahá'í World Center. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Trust, 1993. p. 84

prosperous world civilization. Yet, it is not only civilization that God's will directs towards unity; the universe itself has been so directed from its earliest beginnings: "From the beginning of time the light of unity hath shed its divine radiance upon the world..."¹⁵

'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates upon this evolutionary course by describing reality's six layers: 1) the mineral spirit; 2) the vegetable spirit; 3) the animal spirit; 4) the human spirit; 5) the spirit of faith; and 6) the Holy Spirit. The mineral spirit possesses the "power of existing"¹⁶ and grows in complexity until the vegetable spirit's capacity for growth emerges.¹⁷ The animal spirit or capacity for sensory perception emerges when spiritual force generates a sufficiently complex organization of organic life and the human spirit or capacity for rational thought emerges when the animal body "is combined and mingled in the most perfect form."¹⁸ Next comes the heavenly spirit or capacity for faith, which "makes the earthly man heavenly, and the imperfect man perfect,"¹⁹ i.e. helps those striving to follow God's teachings to do so and bestows upon them spiritual bounties and bestowals along the way. Finally, there is the Holy Spirit, which "gives a new spirit to human realities,...dispels the darkness of ignorance, and causes the radiation of the light of perfections"²⁰ by periodically manifesting in human form. Whenever such a Divine Messenger appears, "the world is renewed, and a new cycle is founded."²¹ The spiritual force released by each of these figures completely reorganizes the foundation of human society, releases greater measures of spiritual capacity, and inaugurates a new phase of human history.

Shoghi Effendi spends much time describing the way the spiritual forces released by the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh's coming act upon both the Bahá'í community and human civilization. Concerning the Bahá'í administrative order's evolution he writes,

¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. trans. Habib Taherzadeh and A Committee at the Bahá'í World Center. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Trust, 1988. p. 127

¹⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Paris Talks*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í trust, 2011. p. 25

¹⁷ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Some Answered Questions*. trans. Laura C. Barney. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Trust, 1981. p. 142

¹⁸ Ibid. 144

¹⁹ Ibid. 144

²⁰ Ibid. 145

²¹ Ibid. 145

The onrushing forces so miraculously released through the agency of the two independent and swiftly successive Manifestations are now under our very eyes and through the care of the chosen stewards of a far-flung Faith being gradually mustered and disciplined. They are slowly crystallizing into institutions that will come to be regarded as the hall-mark and glory of the age we are called upon to establish and by our deeds immortalize.²²

These spiritual forces not only guide Bahá'í administration to greater maturity, but also remold the very foundations of civilization and impel humanity towards the realization of a unified, peaceful, and prosperous society:

A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation—such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving.²³

Recent messages of the Universal House of Justice explore how these same spiritual forces animate the current pattern of local community development. For example, concerning the maturation of the some 14,000 geographical “clusters” into which the Bahá'í world has since 2001 been divided, they remark, “[t]he abundant experience which has...accrued enables the believers now to conceive of the movement of a population, propelled by mounting spiritual forces, in terms of a rich and dynamic continuum.”²⁴ They go on to explain how devotional gatherings add impetus to this process: “In diverse settings, on every continent, groups of believers are uniting with others in prayer, turning their hearts in supplication to their Maker, and calling to their aid those spiritual forces upon which the efficacy of their individual and collective efforts depends.”²⁵ Likewise, “the operation of spiritual forces in the arena of service becomes

²² Shoghi Effendi. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*. Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Trust, 1991. p. 98

²³ Ibid. 204

²⁴ The Universal House of Justice. *The Five Year Plan 2011-2016: Messages of the Universal House of Justice*. West Palm Beach: Palabra Publications, 2011. p. 31

²⁵ Ibid. 30

increasingly apparent”²⁶ when local communities learn to pursue their community building endeavors with a humble yet systematic posture of learning.

A recent document prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá’í World Center, *For the Betterment of the World*, describe the organic pattern that the spiritual forces animating Bahá’í projects of social action display.²⁷ Such projects begin when individuals and local communities respond to particular challenges with insights provided by the Writings. As these efforts mature, they expand in complexity and scope until the point where more complex institutional support is needed. With the help of the Office of Social and Economic Development, various organizations at this level of maturity form an expanding network for learning by sharing experiences and insights with one another. Certain efforts eventually prove so effective that the entire network adopts them, which creates a need for more extensive institutional support and gives rise to a global body of knowledge. The Bahá’í community can then offer insights gleaned from this body of knowledge to relevant discourses in order to help all of humanity advance.

We can summarize the above insights gleaned from Bahá’í sources as follows: spiritual force progressively reveals its inward potencies as it organizes reality in increasingly complex ways. Once the human spirit emerges, the Holy Spirit starts appearing periodically in human form to add impetus and direction to humanity’s development. Those communities and individuals who recognize the Divine Messenger for their epoch and strive to follow his teachings receive special bounties and bestowals from the spirit of faith. At the current moment in the Bahá’í dispensation, these gifts tend to contribute to a) the development of individuals’ spiritual capacities, b) the administrative order’s maturation, c) local community’s development, d) the expansion and consolidation of the body of active believers, e) projects of social action, f) efforts to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society. At the same time, spiritual force impels

²⁶ Ibid. 35

²⁷ Bahá’í International Community. Office of Social and Economic Development. *For The Betterment of the World*. Web. <<http://www.bahai.org/features/sed/betterment.pdf>>

all of humanity, in one way or another, towards the realization of a unified, peaceful, and prosperous world civilization.

Conclusion

From the above analyses, it should be clear i) that the concept of spiritual force constitutes an important component of both Teilhard's thought and a Bahá'í conceptual framework and ii) that Teilhard's concept of spiritual force resonates in many noteworthy ways with accounts given in Bahá'í sources. Perhaps the most profound resonance is their consensus that the same patterns of spiritual evolution that animated cosmic history now impel humanity towards the construction of a unified, peaceful, and prosperous world civilization characterized by the harmony of science and religion.

Of course, there are many differences between a Bahá'í and Teilhardian concept of spiritual force. For one, Teilhard avoids the kind of strong theological and metaphysical claims that fill the Bahá'í Writings. This should not be surprising, though, as he does not claim to speak with the voice of divine authority as the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá do. More profoundly still, there is no comparison between these two concepts' scope, force, and intricacy: the writings of the Báb, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice offer the most colossal, original, and encompassing output of religious thought that this, and perhaps any other, epoch has seen, and the insights and teachings deployed therein have been systematically studied and applied by the millions of their supporters who have thus far walked the earth. Teilhard, on the other hand, is the author of several insightful books that have had little impact on either the Catholic or natural-scientific communities that he hoped to reach. This is not to belittle the value of Teilhard's work, which for Bahá'ís cannot but appear as one of the more remarkably resonant vision advanced during the modern period. Rather, the point is simply to clarify the very different nature of the two sources here considered.

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