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Dialogue Among Civilizations

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Note from Editor

The annual Association for Bahá'í Studies conference this year was held on the 14th April. Some of the talks presented at the conference inspired the papers that appear in this volume. The United Nations General assembly adopted a resolution in 1998 to make the first year of the twenty-first century the International Year of "Dialogue Among Civilizations". Since the Singapore Bahá'í Studies Conference is dedicated to promoting religious and cultural harmony, it is therefore fitting that both our 2001 annual conference and this volume focus on "Dialogue Among Civilizations".

I would like to thank Ann Hendricks and Lynette Thomas for their help in editing this journal, as well as Phyllis Chew and Zhang Jun for the insertion of Chinese characters into the text of two papers.

Anjam Khursheed
December, 2001

The Dialogue between Yin-Yang Concepts and the Bahá'í Faith

Phyllis Ghim Lian Chew

Abstract

The yin-yang concept is a pivotal theory in traditional Chinese thought influencing many aspects of Chinese civilization, government, architecture, personal relationships and ethics. There are significant similarities between this ancient paradigm and the spirit and principles of the Bahá'í Faith, especially regarding the origin of matter, the nature of history, man-woman relationships and health and healing. Bearing in mind the UN Year 2001 for a Creative "Dialogue Among Civilizations", this paper will set out to discuss how these similarities may be helpful in the modern encounter between Chinese culture and the Bahá'í Faith.

1. Introduction

From its earliest expression in myth, legend and verse over 3,000 years ago, the yin–yang concept has remained central to the Chinese way of viewing things and can be said to be the primal polarity in the individual and the cosmos in Chinese thought.[1] While this observation of the prominence of the principle of duality in the frame of things is not unique to China,[2] it is highly pertinent to speak of it as essentially "Chinese" since it has penetrated deeply into the popular culture and dominated the

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[1] The origin of *yin-yang* is not linked to the vision of any single individual or to any single text and the question of its beginning remains a matter of great dispute. Such a concept may have existed even in Neolithic China before the rise of high civilization. It was first recorded in texts of the Spring and Autumn period (722-481 BC).

[2] One of the Hermetic texts repeats the same theme: "All things are but two: that which is made and that which makes. And the one cannot be separated from the other, the Maker cannot exist apart from the thing made, nor the thing made apart from the Maker" (Libellus 14:5, qtd. in Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter" p. 26).

languages of medicine, geomancy, and other accepted "sciences" without major challenge.

The ancient Chinese first postulated the notion of two opposing basic forces springing from the framework of Tao (道: "One/Totality") to explain the tension between stability and change in the seasons. For the Chinese, yin–yang concepts were able to account for many natural phenomena. Indeed, current scientific thought deeply reinforces the feeling that humans are fundamentally shaped by forces—natural and social—beyond human control, and there is the accompanying belief that those who understand these forces are somehow able to master them in the service of human ends. There is thus a quest to align the human realm with the realm of nature, and while the cosmic individual, Chinese or otherwise, does not "control" nature, his or her knowledge of how to "align" the human with the natural immeasurably enlarges the ability to control his or her life.

What is little known, however, is that there are significant similarities between this ancient paradigm and the spirit and principles of the Bahá'í Faith, especially regarding the origin of matter, the nature of history, man-woman relationships and health and healing. Bearing in mind the UN Year 2001 for a "Creative Dialogue among Civilizations", this paper will set out to discuss how these similarities may be helpful in the modern encounter between Chinese culture and the Bahá'í Faith. Dialogue is important because of the need to prevent ethnocentricism in a rapidly shrinking and inter-connected world. There is a need to be exposed to different traditions and psychological viewpoints. It becomes important to view modern science as just one tradition of science amongst many others.

Before proceeding further with this modern encounter between yin-yang concepts and the Bahá'í Faith, I need to state from the onset that the subsequent references to Taoist influence refer more to Taoist philosophy rather than Taoist religion. The former is represented by the philosophies of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, documented in the texts ascribed to them, namely the *Tao-te Ching* and the *Chuang-tzu* as well as the later materials such as the *Huainanzi* and the *Liezi*. The Taoist religion, on the other hand, can be traced to Chang Tao-ling (c. 2nd century CE), who claimed that he had a vision whereby Lao-tzu gave him the authority to organise

religious communities, forgive faults and sins, and to heal and to exorcise evil spirits. Over the centuries, many different schools of Taoism arose, based on Chang's vision, which drew inspiration, imagery and even gods from the original philosophy of Lao Tzu.[3]

2. The Theory: Yin and Yang

Before the commencement of our dialogue, the basic features of yin–yang cosmology need to be drawn out. Basically, its essential characteristics may be summarized into four key concepts: relativity, unity, complementarity, and balance.

Relativity

Yin and yang are, first and foremost, conceptual archetypes rather than actual material entities. They are philosophical constructs of two polar elements and, by themselves, do not mean anything since they are only employed to express a relation: one notion is the opposite of the other; the one is positive, the other negative. The ancient Chinese regard these concepts as balancing powers in the universe for regulating cosmic order, and use them to describe how things function in relation to each other and to the universe.

Yin and yang also contain within themselves the possibility of opposition and change; that is, yin and yang can be further divided into yin and yang. This is an extension of the logic that divides all phenomena into yin and yang aspects, allowing further division within aspects *ad infinitum*. This means that within each yin and yang category, another yin and yang category can be distinguished. For example, the son is both yin and yang; yin because he is believed to be inferior to his father and yang because he is believed to be superior as male. Nothing is neutral, and everything is relative and contains within it a multiplicity of relationships. In other words, nothing is absolutely yin or yang—only more yin compared to something, or more yang compared to something else.

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[3] See P. G. L. Chew, "Death and Immortality: the Taoist Religion in Singapore and the Bahá'í Faith."

As relative concepts, yin and yang can be used extensively to explain a host of natural and social phenomena. In an old text of myths, called the *Chang Huang T'u-shu Pien,*[4] the unlimited extension of the yin and yang is further clarified:

> "Heaven and the sun, spring and summer, east and south are yang, the earth and the moon, autumn and winter, west and north are yin. But during the day heaven and earth are both yang, and at night they are both yin. In spring and summer, heaven and earth, the sun and the moon are all yang, in autumn and winter they are all yin. In the east and the south the four seasons are always yang, in the west and the north they are always yin. The left hand is yang, the right one yin, in this no change is possible, but raise both hands, then they are both yang, and put them down, and they are both yin, and no matter whether you raise them or put them down, when they are hot they are both yang, and when they are cold they are both yin."

Therefore, although it is possible to distinguish yin and yang, it is impossible to separate them since they depend on each other for definition. Furthermore, the things in which yin and yang are distinguished could not be defined without the existence of yin and yang dualities; for example, one cannot speak of temperature apart from its yin and yang aspects—hot or cold. It is this notion of relativity as suggested throughout the *Tao-te Ching* (c. 450 BC), a small (about 5,000 characters) but extraordinary work on Chinese life and culture written by one called Lao-tze ("old man" or "teacher"):

> "For what is and what is not beget each other;
> Difficult and easy complete each other;
> Long and short show each other;
> High and low place each other;
> Noise and sound harmonize each other;
> Before and behind follow each other."[5]

Su Shih (960–1279 AD), a poet-scholar from the Sung dynasty, indicates the importance of paying attention to perspectives. When there is a shift

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[4] A. Forke, *The World Conception of the Chinese*, pp. 214–15.
[5] *Tao-te Ching*, (Maurer) ch. 2.

in our position, the objects appear to change. Therefore, we can no longer be so naive as to assume that what we see constitutes all there is to see. Again, the notion of relativity is subtly emphasized:

> "From the side, a whole range; from the end, a single peak:
> Far, near, high, low no two parts alike. Why can't I tell the true shape of Lu Shan?
> Because I myself am in the mountain."[6]

Unity

The second characteristic to note in the discussion of the yin–yang correlates is their essential unity. While one might have expected that the two would result in opposite poles, incompatible and irreconcilable, the opposite is actually the case. The two are, in essence, basically one. Thus, in place of the theories of duality, competition, and opposition so common in Western philosophy, there is instead the theory of succession; e.g., day follows night, night follows day, small becomes big, big becomes small, slow changes to fast, fast slackens to slow, what goes up comes down and vice versa. It is a system of thought whereby all things are seen as parts of a whole. No entity can ever be isolated from its relationship to other entities, and nothing can exist in and of itself.

One factor influencing this implicit unity of polarity is the notion that the correlates originate from and are united in one common principle, i.e., the Tao, the life-giving power or principle. This idea was also evident in the ideas of the Greek philosophers of the Ionian School (c. 585–540 BC) e.g., Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes, who argued that orderliness could only be explained though the existence of a single unifying substance which was in control of all the parts. The Eastern traditions constantly refer to this ultimate, indivisible reality which manifests itself in all things and of which all things are parts. It is called Brahman in Hinduism, Dharmakaya in Buddhism, and Tao in Taoism. Because it transcends all concepts and categories, the Buddhist also calls it Tathata or "Suchness". This also bears some similarity to the Bahá'í idea of the "first will" or what the ancient philosophers termed the "First Mind." According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it is an emanation which is "not limited by

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[6] B. Watson, *Selection from a Sung Dynasty Poet*, p 101.

time or place; it is without beginning or end—beginning and end in relation to God are one."[7]

On this mystic concept of Tao, Chuang-tzu (370 to 319 BC), a literary genius with profound spiritual insights, has constructed his view of the universe. According to him, the manifestation of this first principle in each individual thing is called "te" (德: "virtue"). Tao and te, thus, are actually of one essence, the former being the universal essence, and the latter the share of the former deposited in every individual being. In short, Taoism is the philosophy of the unity of the universe and the return of all to the "Primeval One," the "Divine Intelligence," the "Source" of all things. For the Taoist then, the ideal is, implicitly, to return to Tao. As Chuang-tzu puts it:

> "In the beginning there was non-being. It had neither being nor name. The One originates from it: it has oneness but not yet physical form. When things obtain it and come into existence, that is called virtue (which gives their individual character). That which is formless is divided into yin and yang and from the beginning going on without interruption is called destiny (ming 命: "fate"). Through movement and rest, it produces all things. When things are produced in accordance with the principle (li 理) there is a physical form. When the activities follow their own specific principles, that is nature. By cultivating one's nature one will return to virtue. When virtue is perfect, one will be one with the beginning. Being one with the beginning, one becomes vacuous (thus, receptive to all) and being vacuous, one becomes great. One will then be united with the sound and breath of things. When one is united with the breath of things, one is then united with the universe."[8]

In the *Tafsir-i-Kuntu Kanzan Makhifiyyan*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that form and substance arise simultaneously and that they are interdependent:

> "They have said that the potentialities (qábiliyyát) and the recipients of the potentialities (maqbúlát) came into being and were created simultaneously. For example, it has been stated that all things are composed of two elements: the "Fashioner" (qábil) and the "Fashioned

[7] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 203.
[8] W. T. Chan, *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, p 202.

(maqbúl). By "Fashioned" is meant substance (mádda) and primary matter (huyúlá), and by Fashioner is meant form and shape, which confines and limits the primary matter from its state of indefiniteness and freedom to the courtyard of limitation and definite form." (Makátíb 2:35)[9]

It must be noted that this belief in unity or the basic oneness of the universe is also one of the most important revelations of modern physics[10]. However, while Chinese philosophers believe in the existence of a common principle or life-giving force[11] which binds both yin and yang, they are silent about whether humanity evolved accidentally or as a result of God's purpose. All that they are committed to saying are that yin and yang are united in the essential unity of the Tao and that all changes in nature are manifestations of the dynamic interplay between the polar opposites yin and yang. This stands in strong contrast to prophetic religions, such as the Bahá'í Faith, which teaches that humanity's origins can be viewed as the unfolding of God's plan[12] and that the "Word of God . . . is the Cause of the entire creation, while all else besides His Word are but the creatures and the effects thereof."[13]

Complementarity

We have already discussed how the yin-yang concepts are a pair of opposites in a dynamic polar relationship with each other. Another distinctive characteristic of yin–yang cosmology is its essential complementarity. It is a view of a wholesome nature made up intricately of halves. In other words, everything that is a half must be completed by another half, for example, spirit and matter, subject and object, inside and outside, above and below, man and woman, light and darkness, etc. .

This relationship may be better understood if we look at the yin–yang symbol. Here, the circle representing the whole is divided into yin (black)

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[9] Provisional translation by Moojan Momen in *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 3.4.26–27 and quoted in Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter", p 26.

[10] J. D. Barrow and F. J. Tipler, *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle*.

[11] "Principle" suggests a more abstract, perhaps "metaphysical" interpretation. In Neo-Confucianism, this marks the divide between "I" (principle) and "Ch'i" (vital energy). Earlier, the idea of a "life-giving force" is used to explain what gives rise to yin and yang.

[12] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 196–97.

[13] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 140.

and yang (white). The small circles of opposite shading illustrate that within yang, there is yin and vice versa. In any yin phenomenon there is a little yang; in every yang phenomenon there is a little yin. In other words, the night is never completely dark because there is always some yang light (from the moon, stars, fireflies), and the yang day has some darkness (shadows for instance). The dynamic curve dividing them indicates that yin and yang are continuously merging. Thus, yin and yang create, control and transform each other.[14]

This intricate complementarity is also extended to the relationship between humankind and nature and thus an organic conception of the cosmos is proposed; that is, the view of the human being as a microcosmic image of the macrocosm. This embodies a belief that everything, however small, in some sense reflects this relationship. Just as the cells of the body imply the whole, so every part of creation implies the cosmos. As the work of Chuang-tzu portrays, the Tao is the all-pervading principle that exists prior to the existence of the universe, and it is to be found in every thing, no matter how trivial or base.[15]

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[14] Visually, this is best illustrated in classical Chinese art, e.g., landscape paintings where men and women, activity and tranquility, mountain and water, etc., are balanced and harmonized.

[15] *Chuang-tzu*, chapter 2

'Abdu'l-Bahá says something similar which requires further reflection: ". . . all parts of the creational world are of one whole."[16] In reference to animals and vegetables, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: ". . . the animal, as to its body, is made up of the same constituent elements as man."[17] "All the elements that are combined in man exist also in vegetables."[18] In addition, the following quotation has a broader meaning but is relevant nevertheless. Quoting the Imám 'Alí, Bahá'u'lláh writes, "Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form, when within thee the universe is folded?"[19]

The essence of this complementarity reinforces once again the awareness of the mutual interrelation of all objects and events, and the experience of all phenomena in the world as manifestations of a basic oneness. All things are seen as interdependent and inseparable parts of the cosmic whole; as different manifestations of the same ultimate reality. The "ten thousand things," which the ancient Chinese believed to spin around Tao, are not isolated entities spinning around time and space, but rather spirit and matter, mineral and plant, animal and human, which are all manifestations of the Tao, which is indivisible, transcendent, and immanent all at the same time.[20] To understand any part demands an understanding of the whole.

This idea is implicit in the cosmology of early Chinese texts. The *Shu-ching* (Book of History),[21] for example, contains an early mention of the human and cosmic correspondence. "Heaven," it says, "hears and sees as our people hear and see." The *Li-chi* (Collection of Rituals) describes human beings as "the product of the attributes of Heaven and Earth, by the interaction of the dual force of nature, the union of the animal "kuei" (鬼: "ghost"), and the intelligent "shen" (神: "soul"), and the finest matter of the five elements." This idea of a human being as a miniature heaven

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[16] *Bahá'í World Faith*, p 364.
[17] Abdu'l Bahá, *Selections*, p 153.
[18] Abdu'l Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 258.
[19] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, p 34.
[20] Note that the attribution of transcendence to Tao is challenged by those who consider Tao to be a kind of process philosophy. Here, Tao is immanent, the sum total of being and non-being. This view maintains the inter-relatedness of all things. The totality of all the particulars is *Tao*. See R. P. Peerenboom, *Cosmogony, the Taoist Way*.
[21] This is a book of sayings ascribed to the legendary sage kings Yao and Shun in the third millennium BC.

and earth is also fundamental to the *I Ching* (Book of Changes)[22] which likens heaven to the head and earth to the belly. Macro–micro correspondences constitute a constant theme in many of the hexagrams of the *I Ching*.[23]

A famous poem by Chang Tsai (1020–77 AD), a pioneer of Neo-Confucianism, reads: "Heaven is my father and Earth is my mother, and even such a small creature as I find an intimate place in their midst. Therefore that which fills the universe I regard as my body and that which directs the universe I consider as my nature. All people are my brothers and sisters, and all things are my companions."[24]

The Bahá'í perspective, like yin–yang cosmology, points to the significance of complementarity. Members and elements are interconnected and influence one another spiritually and materially, although this has not yet been conclusively substantiated by present-day science. 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares, "but I mean that this limitless universe is like the human body, all the members of which are connected and linked with one another with the greatest strength. . . . In the same way, the parts of this infinite universe have their members and elements connected with one another, and influence one another spiritually and materially."[25]

Balance

The fourth important characteristic of yin–yang theory is the delicate role of balance, which is needed to promote harmony between the two

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[22] In Chinese literature, four holy men are cited as authors, namely: Fu Hsi, the legendary figure representing the era of hunting and fishing and the invention of cooking; King Wen; the Duke of Chou; and Confucius.

[23] This belief is chiefly responsible for the Chinese art of geomancy, feng shui (literally "wind and water"). Since the cosmos is a unity, no part of which is finally independent from the whole, it follows that events at one level, or in one place, will have their influence at other levels and in other places. Feng shui thus claims to teach people how to rule nature and guide their own destiny by revealing to them the ways of heaven and earth. Knowledge of feng shui, was therefore a means of transforming people from the play-things of nature to co-creators with her; this was not only of benefit to humanity, but also to the natural world, which was seen in a sense as waiting for the helping hand of human understanding and human action for its fulfillment.

[24] W. T. Chan, *Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy*, 497.

[25] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp 245–46.

polarities. Balance is needed if complementary opposites are to interact to achieve stability for the entire creation.

While most Western philosophies have tended to be lopsided by glorifying one pole at the expense of the other—e.g., the mind is considered to be better than the body, and logic better than intuition—the yin–yang paradigm emphasizes the equality of proportions. A deficiency of one aspect implies an excess of the other. Thus, if yin is excessive, yang will be too weak. For example, summer is considered as yang and isolated as such, it may seem "excessive," but not so if the whole of the four seasons is taken into account. There is a cosmological balance. Another example is that if it is too hot, then there is not enough coolness and vice versa. If the temperature is neither too cold nor too hot, then both cold and hot aspects are mutually controlled and held in check. In human relationships, as in a marriage, one can say that here the extent to which one partner can be aggressive depends on the extent to which the other is passive. They exert mutual control over each other. Thus, in a relationship in which yin and yang are unbalanced for long periods of time, the resulting transformation may be drastic.

When Confucius (551–479 BC) wrote *The Doctrine of the Mean*, he meant that both excess and inadequacy were extremes and that only by understanding the "Mean" and holding on to it could harmony be achieved.[26] Thus, there is a saying of Confucius that, "to go beyond is as wrong as to fall short" (*Analects*, 11:15). Likewise, Bahá'u'lláh said that "In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil."[27]

This traditional notion of balance has significant implications on moral values and has been used to explain the relationship between good and evil. To the Chinese philosophical mind, good and bad are, first and foremost, opposites that are interrelated in the same way as yin and yang. For Chuang-tzu (who believed that the notions of right and wrong do not exist, since right is right only because of the existence of wrong), nothing can be said to be absolutely right.[28] Good and evil are movements along the same spectrum, and for each concept to be meaningful, the other must

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[26] *Doctrine of the Mean*, ch. 27.
[27] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p 69.
[28] Fung, *Chuang Tzu*, p 50. See also Magill, *Masterpieces of World Philosophy*, p 187.

exist.[29] This was a very advanced realization for its day, bearing in mind that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had to emphasize with great thoroughness in the twentieth century that just as darkness is but the absence or reduction of light, so evil is but the absence or reduction of good—the undeveloped state. A bad person is one who has not developed the better side of his nature, just as a good person is one who has. Chuang-tzu believes that conflict arises when a person departs from Tao and tries to act contrary to nature.

This concept of balancing both yin and yang forces and of being at one with Tao has been used to teach morality throughout Chinese history. Lao-tzu illustrates this paradox within a set of instructions on the cultivation of values:

> "On tiptoe you don't stand.
> Astride you don't walk.
> Showing yourself, you don't shine.
> Asserting yourself, you don't show.
> Boasting yourself won't get you credit.
> Vaunting yourself won't let you endure.
> In Tao, these things are called
> Tumors and dregs, which all things abhor.
> Whoever has Tao does not dwell on them."[30]

This paradox of the variability between two poles foreshadows the words of Jesus five hundred years later: "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5) and "The first shall be last and the last first" (Matt. 19:30).

There is, however, a distinct difference between the concept of balance in the Chinese psyche and in the Bahá'í Faith. While keeping to the mean is imperative for harmony, what exactly the mean is in regard to moral and social behaviour is not known. For the Chinese, it is a theoretical mean, a philosophical concept. For the Bahá'ís, however, the Book itself, the

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[29] In contrast, in the Augustinian privation argument, richness would still be meaningful whether there were poverty or not.

[30] *Tao-te Ching*, ch. 24

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the "Most Holy Book" is "the unerring Balance established amongst men."[31]

With an understanding of these four essential characteristics of yin-yang cosmology, I will now proceed to a preliminary exploration of four areas; namely, the origin of creation, the nature of history, the relationship of man and woman, and health and healing, and examine these concepts' relationships across time and space to the Bahá'í Faith.

3. The Tao of Creation

The idea of causation, central to Western thinking, is almost entirely absent in Chinese thought. Indeed no Chinese thinker who discusses the subject admits the possibility of any initial conscious act of creation. Things influence each another not by mechanical causes but by a kind of induction effect. For the Chinese, things were connected, rather than caused. Unlike the ancient Greeks who believed that the essence of knowledge is to grasp the "why" or to prove the existence of the primary cause, the Chinese, influenced by the yin and yang paradigm, were most interested in understanding the interrelations of patterns within the cosmos and in becoming attuned to the unseen dynamic. As Ronan and Needham argue:

> "The fundamental difference was that in Europe, there was a need to think of God as the creator or the prime mover behind the machine. Not the Chinese. To them the parts of a living body as the universe could account for the observed phenomena by a kind of will: co-operation of the component part was spontaneous, even involuntary and this alone was sufficient. There were thus two traditions of the universe and each went their separate ways."[32]

One reason for the absence of the issue of cause and effect in three thousand years of Chinese philosophy[33] is that the word "cause" implies a

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[31] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p 22.

[32] Ronan and Needham, *The Shorter Science and Civilization*, p. 163

[33] However, the term "Creator" (造物者 Zhào Wù Zhé, and 造化者 Zhào Hùa Zhé) is found in the *Chuang-tzu*.

direct dependency with the effects in much the same way that the attribute of knowledge requires the existence of objects of knowledge. Similarly, the term "Creator" assumes its counterpart, the created, in order to be comprehensible. There was therefore no reason to debate on cause and effect since this was already implied or understood. As the first chapter of the *Tao-te Ching* reiterates:

> "If Tao can be Taoed, it is not Tao.
> If its name can be named, it is not its name.
> Has no name: precedes heaven and earth;
> Has a name: mother of ten thousand things."

The First Cause or the Creator is not the focus here. There is an implied acceptance that it exists, and no effort is made to postulate the hows or whys of its existence. Only a description of the Tao suffices. The Bahá'í Faith, however, explicitly indicates that while God is the creator of all things, God exists completely outside the order of creation. God is like a Divine Craftsperson:

> "Lauded be Thy Name, O Lord my God! I testify that Thou wast a hidden Treasure wrapped within Thine immemorial Being and an impenetrable Mystery enshrined in Thine own Essence. Wishing to reveal Thyself, Thou didst call into being the Greater and the Lesser Worlds [the world hereafter and this world] . . ."[34]

According to the Bahá'í scriptures, God is unknowable and is set apart from his creation. God is outside time and space—both of which are His creation. Being outside the time–space parameters, it becomes logical then to assert that "the latter world hath neither beginning nor end,"[35] something not incomparable with the Taoist's (Chuang-tzu's) notion of heaven as "one of ceaseless revolution, without beginning or end."[36]

Nevertheless, while not concerned in the "whys" of creation, China's greatest thinkers were keen to understand the "hows." Drawing from yin–yang theory, it was postulated that the cosmos is a series of progressions from the One Great Ultimate—the T'ai Ch'i—to the two principles yin

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[34] Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations*, p 48–49.
[35] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* , p 187.
[36] Y. L. Fung, *Chuang Tzu*, p 133.

and yang; the three sources; heaven, earth and humankind; the four seasons; "wu-hsing" (五行: "five phases")[37] represented symbolically by wood, fire, earth, metal and water; and so forth. According to this system, all things, from the big to the small, whether concrete objects, ideas, situations, etc. are results of the interaction of yin and yang.

Interestingly, Bahá'u'lláh also explains the cause of creation through two poles somewhat similar in spirit to the yin and yang—the active force and its recipient or the even and the odd contained in the One that precedes multiplicity. By their interaction, a "heat" or life-giving energy is generated that creates and orders the innumerable beings in the universe:

> "The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different."[38]

Bahá'u'lláh calls that which first results from the active force and its recipient prior to the generation of the world, "al-failayn", the twin active agents, and "al-munfa'il", the twin passive agents, and affirms that they "are indeed created through the irresistible Word of God."[39] In other tablets, he identifies them with the four elements,[40] interestingly enough, something not quite unlike the Chinese "five phases."

The Chinese conception of the five phases (wood, fire, earth, metal and water) apparently stabilized as an ordering principle of Chinese organic philosophy during the late Spring and Autumn period, and like yin–yang, derive from more ancient roots.[41] One notes that the ideas which lay behind the five phases may not have been associated with actual material elements, but rather as elements which assume a dynamic "dialectic"

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[37] The term *wu-hsing* is often translated as "five elements" but that term is misleading, implying that wood, fire, earth, metal, and water are constituents of physical matter. The five are not "elements," but paradigms or analogies for specific modes of being or activity.

[38] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 140.

[39] Ibid., p 140.

[40] That is, "fire," "air," "water," and "earth," the first tokens by which the material creation is generated. See Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter" p 28, pp. 35–36.

[41] The reasons for developing five categories, rather than some other number, are not clearly known. However, they may derive from astrological considerations of the five visible planets.

relation to each other. Similarly, many of the terms used in Bahá'í natural philosophy e.g. earth, water, air, fire, coming from its classical Greek,[42] Indo-European, and Islamic heritage, to describe the metaphysical origin of the universe, cannot always be interpreted in a literary fashion but should be understood in the context of the tradition from which they derive. What is significant is the conceptual similarity of its postulation despite the separation in time and place.

The four elements in the Bahá'í writings which can be held up for structural and conceptual comparison with the Chinese theory of the five phases were expounded in the *Lawh-i-Ayiy-i-Nur* (Tablet of the Verse of Light):

> "Know ye that the first tokens that emanated from the pre- existent Cause in the worlds of creation are the four elements: fire, air, water, and earth... Then the natures (ustuqusat) of these four appeared: heat, moisture, cold and dryness—those same qualities that ye both reckon and know. When the elements interacted and joined with one another, two pillars became evident for each one: for fire, heat and dryness, and likewise for the remaining three in accordance with these rules, as ye are aware. By them God created all that there is in the worlds of creation, whether of the higher or lower realms. In whatsoever things these natures came into equilibrium that thing endured the passage of time, as ye behold with the sun and the moon; and in whatsoever thing these natures came not into balance, that thing passed quickly into extinction, even as ye observe to be the case with the creatures of the lower worlds."[43]

The above quotation suggests the gradual development of life on earth, which is also a part of the belief of ancient China.[44] The *I Ching*, for

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[42] In the West, the ancient Greeks had elements which did refer to substance, recognizing three as early as seventh century BC and five by 560 BC. Earth, air, fire, water and a fifth essence that acted as a kind of substratum of the others. However, it was not until Aristotle, that the Greek elements became properly associated with qualities (Ronan and Needham, *The Shorter Science*, p 147).

[43] *Ma'idiy-i-Asmani* 4:82. Provisional translation by Brown, "A Bahá'í Perspective of Matter," pp 35–36.

[44] This contrasts with the literal interpretations of the Bible that the earth is only around 6,000 years old. Bahá'u'lláh states: "The learned men, that have fixed at several thousand years the life of this earth, have failed, throughout the long period of their observation, to

instance, views civilization as a systematic and progressive development from simple undifferentiated beginnings towards a complex structure, and the development of the individual as following a parallel course from ignorance to enlightenment and from an unwitting identity with Tao to knowing the Tao. The following is a traditional story accounting for the gradual creation of the universe:

> "A period of 2,267,000 years was computed to have intervened from the beginning of heaven and earth to the year 480 BC. This period was divided into great sections, each with its own characteristics. Preceding that period were countless ages of one unbroken black night and the profoundest gloom. The universe consisted of Breath or Gas which was a homogeneous unit without form. Out of this limitless chaos came the Great Limit, or Beginning. Then the grosser particles of the universal gas fell down and became Earth, the finer ascended and became heaven. This was the beginning of heaven and earth. These two in the course of many thousands of years produced the four great Bodies—sun, moon, planets and constellations; and the four lesser Bodies—water, fire, earth and stone. Then was the eternal stillness terminated. The interactions of these various bodies produced transformations, first of a simple then of a more complex kind till they finally culminated in the production of man. Though man was the most intelligent of all beings, many ages elapsed before the earliest rudiments of civilization appeared. Some of the remote ancestors of the Chinese dwelt in caves, and wandered without fixed abode till one of their number devised a kind of dwelling, which put an end to cave homes. People of another tribe were naked, except for a small covering of plants before and another behind. One of them was a sage who cut wood into slices so thin that they could cover the body like fish scales and protect it from the winds and the frosts. He taught them to plait their hair so that the heaviest rain would drop off their head. . . ."[45]

One notes that such stories existed before Darwin's theory of evolution or any hints of current concept of cosmology such as those expounded by Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*) where the universe began as a "big

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consider either the number or the age of the other planets" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 163).

[45] J. Ross, *The Origin of the Chinese*, pp. 1–3. See also N. J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning*, and the *Huai-nan Tzu* (180–122 BC).

bang" billions of years ago and the solar system was formed from the dust of space much later.[46] This is not to imply that the Chinese created the theory of evolution; only that their mythological tradition and literature enabled them to fit in more easily with later and modern scientific theories.

With regards to the gradual and systematically progressive nature of creation, Abdu'l-Bahá himself suggests that creation unfolds in a sequential manner. The Bahá'í view is unequivocal and clearer in the assertion that evolution tended to produce higher and more complex forms:

> "Then it is clear that original matter, which is in the embryonic state, and the mingled and composed elements which were its earliest forms, gradually grew and developed during many ages and cycles, passing from one shape and form to another, until they appeared in this perfection, this system, this organization and this establishment, though the supreme wisdom of God."[47]

4. The Tao of Historical Perspective

The way the Chinese viewed their own cultural, social, and religious history was also directly influenced by the yin–yang paradigm. Basically a holistic one, in which parts are viewed as integral to the whole, the yin-yang cosmological perspective endowed the Chinese with the ability to interpret events in a larger historical or geographical perspective than would otherwise have been the case. Two areas will be examined to illustrate this point: comparative religion and world unity.

In a perusal of Chinese history, one notices that religious conflict has been less of an issue than in any other major culture,[48] a situation due in part to the yin–yang cosmological perspective. The presence of great religious teachers at different periods of history among different peoples can be likened to the Chinese saying that tributaries branching out from the same

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[46] See S. H. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time*.
[47] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 182–83, p 199.
[48] See Chew, *Brothers and Sisters*.

river may start off at different points and times and bear different names, but the water which each receives from its source does not vary. To the Chinese, each religion has often been understood as a branch of the educational system, and all founders and sages are but "teachers" of a particular school.[49] Although there have been occasional polemics and religious persecution in China's long history, the traditional attitude has been generally one of tolerance rather than dogmatic discrimination and ideological opposition. As the existence of strong Buddhist and Taoist elements in Neo-Confucianism make plain, a willingness to embrace different ideologies as complementary is characteristic of both Chinese thought and East Asian thought in general. If there was persecution, it was more often the result of struggles for power or recognition that a certain religion was "better," rather than a denial of essential truths of other religions.[50]

This sense of wholeness has always led the Chinese mind towards the sense of relativity of particulars within the universal totality, and it is not surprising that the Chinese were among the first to envisage a future society of world brotherhood and unity. Arnold Toynbee, a great philosopher of history, included Chinese civilization among the five survivors of a number of ancient and medieval civilizations that once existed.[51] He found that among these, the Chinese civilization was the only one that aimed to eliminate war by establishing a world government of Great Unity (or Great Harmony) guided by the humanistic precepts of Confucius. While the search for an ideal Commonwealth has been a

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[49] The Chinese people, after all, called their religion "Chiao" ("Teaching" or "Education") and the founders of religions "Chiao Tsu" –"Teaching Master."

[50] There was persecution in 845 AD where more than 4,600 large monasteries and 40,000 smaller ones were destroyed. The issues at work were basically political and economic; e.g., too many able-bodied men had joined monasteries and thus became unavailable for agricultural production and army or labour conscription, or too much land belonged to Buddhist churches and thus became tax-exempt. Significantly, confiscated images of bronze were made into currency, those of iron into agricultural implements, those of gold and silver turned to the Treasury and images of wood, clay and stone left untouched. So it was never anti-religious. See Chew, *Brothers and Sisters*, p. 17.

[51] The other four are the Indian civilization in southern Asia, the Islamic civilization across the Middle East and North Africa, the Greek Orthodox Empire ranging from Greece to Russia, and Western Christianity in Western Europe and America. See A. Toynbee, *A Study of History*.

feature of other civilizations,[52] it was only in China that it formed part of the psyche not just of the scholar class, but also of the common people.

Very early on, the Chinese people entertained the lofty thought of the "pacification of the world" (大同, Ta-t'ung: "Universalism"), bringing to mind 'Abdu'l-Bahá's point that "the most important principle of divine philosophy is the oneness of the world of humanity, the unity of mankind."[53] Throughout the history of Chinese religion, such calls have come from its charismatic leaders and visionary prophets. Confucius dreamt of a united world, which he termed "the Great Unity" (Ta-t'ung).[54] He urged his disciples to strive to produce a paradise covering the whole world. His ideas have been a motivating force for many Chinese legislators, scholars, and authors, especially reformers and revolutionaries such as Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the founder of the Chinese Republic in 1912.[55] Another Chinese philosopher who was fascinated with the utopian idea of the Great Unity was Mo-tzu (479–381 BC), who developed a concept called "all-embracing love" (兼爱, chien-ai), which emphasized a love of all humankind rather than just the love of the family. Then there was Mao Tse-tung, whose aim it was to establish the "Great Harmony," and although Mao was much influenced by Marx and Lenin early in life, much of his philosophy is, interestingly, in tune with the principles and attitudes of traditional Chinese philosophy.

While this kind of ideal, a united world characterized by world solidarity, has not been in total keeping with actual practice, as reported in historical accounts of European traders and diplomats who were more often regarded as "barbarians" rather than as co-equals in the "Middle Kingdom," such isolated individual accounts, most of which occurred in the time of Western imperial expansion, should be better interpreted in the context of the existing political–social situation and do not represent the essential spirit of Chinese thought.

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[52] Plato's *Republic* is for example, a model for many. A utopian island also occurs in the *Sacred History* of Eluthemerus (c. 300 BC). In addition, there is the story of Atlantis which has inspired many utopian legends.

[53] Abdu'l Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 31.

[54] The term "Ta-t'ung" has been interpreted as "The Great Commonwealth," "The Great Harmony," "One World System," etc. "The Great Unity" is another such translation.

[55] See, for example, Chew, *The Chinese Religion*, p 74.

5. The Tao of Man and Woman

Man and woman, like yang and yin, are an example of the creative and complementary forces which when in complete balance result in harmony and prosperity. In the *I Ching*, there are many references to male–female relations in both verbal and nonverbal symbols. The book begins with the two hexagrams "Ch'ien" and "K'un," which stand for heaven and earth, yang and yin, male and female. Part II of the book also begins with reference to male and female. Hexagram 31, "Hsien," depicting a lake above a mountain, refers to the mutual influence and attraction between the two natural forces. One cannot do without the other.[56] Thus, although heaven is spoken of as the powerful male force and earth as the weak female force, the two are actually equal, for one cannot exist without the other. In other words, Heaven can accomplish nothing unless Earth responds. Ontologically, they form a unity and are therefore equal.

Interestingly, in one of his tablets, 'Abdu'l–Bahá explains the story of Adam and Eve as a metaphor for the active force and its recipient:

> "Adam signifieth that reality which is pervasive, effulgent and active, that is the manifestation of God's names and attributes, and the evidences of His mercy. Whereas Eve is that reality which is the seeker and the recipient of the force, the grace, the message and the influence—that reality which receiveth the impact of all God's Names and Attributes."[57]

This might be said to be related to the two principles inherent in the Primal Will mentioned by Bahá'u'lláh as "al-fa'il", the active force, and "al-munfa'il," its recipient.[58]

However, while yin has been associated with the feminine and yang with the masculine, this should be interpreted as a means of exemplifying a polarity of abstractions such as that between "night" and "day" and "hot" and "cold." They do not represent the female or male sex in actuality but rather serve to illustrate the notion of polarity. As a case in point, all

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[56] See Rosemont, *Early Chinese Cosmology*, and also the *I Ching*.
[57] Nakhjavani, *Response*, p 72.
[58] See section in this article on "The Tao of Creation."

people, whether male or female, go through yin and yang phases, and the personality of each man and woman is not a static entity but a dynamic phenomenon resulting from the play between masculine and feminine phenomena. This is a theory that also serves to delineate different stages in life, each with its own different needs and tasks, advantages and disadvantages. The first half of life, led by yang, is a time of differentiation, during which we understand ourselves and the world by dividing it into pieces. The second half is characterized by yin or the tendency to make whole, to see and experience the connections between things, to replace separateness with harmony.

However, through the historical passage of time, this concept has been developed to establish a rigid order in which men were supposed to be completely masculine and women completely feminine. The patriarchal bias also saw yin and yang become associated with moral values, and the correlates were subsequently used to explain the polarity of light and darkness, and good and bad. Good deeds, for instance, stemmed from the principle of yang, which through the passage of time represented principles such as benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith, and which added to the spiritual bank of merit. Conversely, bad deeds stemmed from the principles of yin and such principles as passion, anger, sorrow, likes, dislikes, desires, and violence and anything that caused punishment in the afterlife in the other world. Such an interpretation was later symbolized into script so that the character for yin (阴) originally meant the shady side of a slope and is associated with qualities such as cold, rest, responsiveness, passivity, darkness, interiority, downwardness and inwardness. On the other hand, the character for yang (阳) stood for the sunny side of a slope and all that was bright and creative.

Yin–yang cosmology was also utilized to portray prototypes of the human social order, e.g., "The ruler is yang, the subject yin; the father is yang, the son yin; the husband is yang, the wife yin." Later, writers such as Tung Chung-shu (179–104 BC), a major representative of the New Text School (the Han Dynasty form of Confucianism which was heavily influenced by the five phases and yin–yang theory), taught that "Heaven has trust in the yang but not in the yin."[59] The patriarchal and patrilineal

[59] Bodde, "Harmony and Conflict," p 619.

bias in Chinese culture therefore transformed the original theory by elevating the yang principle at the expense of the yin. Not surprisingly, practices such as female infanticide, footbinding, and the sale of daughters have shown the status of women in traditional Chinese societies to be unenviable. The *I Ching* itself has also contributed to this imbalance.

The patriarchal bias to equate yin with passivity and yang with activity is also evident in Western culture. The attempt to portray women as passive and receptive, and men as active and creative goes back to Aristotle's theory of sexuality and has been used throughout the centuries as a "scientific" rationale for keeping women in a subordinate role, subservient to men. Of course, the understanding of yin as passivity is not itself a problem. What is problematic is when passivity comes to be viewed as undesirable. The whole point of Lao-tzu's teachings, in this respect, is to point out the artificiality of such value distinction.

Interestingly, in Bahá'í scripture, the feminine principle is depicted as an active one, which creates, empowers, rears, and nourishes. It is not a fixed condition of sexuality applied to objects in the created world. Mothering images, for example, are used to suggest the divine creative principle of the word of God:

> "Every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a Mother Letter, and every word uttered by Him Who is the Well Spring of Divine Revelation is a Mother Word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet."[60]

Such mothering images are used to suggest the divine creative principle of the Word of God. Bahá'u'lláh himself identifies the feminine powers of God with the word "Fashioner":

> "No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected. All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the Revelation of this Name."[61]

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[60] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p 142.
[61] Ibid.

The theme of masculine-feminine complementarity and interaction is manifested in the *Tablet of Carmel*.[62] Drewek refers to this tablet as an instance of the divine dramatization of two forces coming together, the Ancient of Days as the Manifestation and a feminine personification of the Mountain of God, the Queen of Carmel, the site of the Manifestation's holy seat or throne. She describes a kind of courtship dance with feelings of separation and longing for reunion followed by a kind of consummation between heaven and earth. This consummation results in the appearance of "the people of Bahá."

It does appear then that Eve's role as a symbol of the "shadowy" yin is now discarded in the light of the Bahá'í revelation. In a long-awaited reunion, the feminine principle is now ready to shift from a competitive to a complementary opposite. For Bahá'ís then, harmony does not mean a blurring of difference or a merging of the two into one in which both natures are sacrificed. On the contrary, following the original spirit of yin–yang, it signifies the combination of the two different parts to produce an aesthetically satisfying whole.

'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained the concept of complementarity in a manner reminiscent of the yin–yang principle:

> "The world of humanity consists of two parts: male and female. Each is the complement of the other. Therefore if one is defective, the other will necessarily be incomplete and perfection cannot be attained. . . . Just as physical accomplishment is complete with two hands, so man and woman, the two parts of the social body, must be perfect. It is not natural that either should remain undeveloped; and until both are perfected, the happiness of the human world will not be realized."[63]

He also compares society to a bird with two wings: "The world of humanity is possessed of two wings: the male and female. So long as these two wings are not equivalent in strength, the bird will not fly."[64] This is an image which echoes Lao-tzu's teachings 2,500 years ago:

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[62] See Drewek, "Feminine Forms of the Divine," p 18.
[63] Abdu'l Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 134.
[64] Ibid., p 375.

"Know the masculine;
Keep to the feminine.
Be beneath-heaven's ravine.
To be beneath-heaven's ravine
Is to stay with unceasing virtue
And return to infancy.

Know the white; [yang]
Keep to the black [yin].
Be beneath-heaven's model.
To be beneath-heaven's model
Is to stay with unerring virtue
And return to the limitless."[65]

It is impossible to read the above (and indeed the *Tao-te Ching* in its entirety) without realizing where Lao-tzu, living in a patriarchal age, placed his true priorities. Replete with yin symbols, it teaches that the sage should adopt the yin qualities. Balance is once again stressed as the essential condition for harmony. If so, the equality between men and women is subtly raised.[66] As a modern interpretation of the *Tao-te Ching* puts it: "Full Balance is equal mind and body, equal woman and man. To realize the Tao, both feet must dance."[67]

6. The Tao of Health and Healing

Imbued with the principles of yin–yang cosmology, Chinese medical theory, like its scientific, historical, and social theories, is based on the logic which assumes that a part can be understood only in its relation to the whole. It is a logic that is always organic or synthetic, attempting to

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[65] *Tao-te Ching*, ch. 28

[66] Similarly, while Confucius did not have much to say directly about women-men relationships, it must be remembered that he placed great emphasis on being humane and contributed to basic human rights with his depiction of the superior person, the development of the original concept of "jen" ("every man can cultivate his nature into loving man and embracing all men with benevolence"), his belief in the original goodness of human beings, his teachings on love and the golden rule. Women are included in the Chinese concept of "jen" or "person."

[67] Grigg, *The Tao of Relationships*, p 219.

organize symptoms into understandable configurations. Just as in the question of the creation of the universe, the question of cause and effect is always secondary to the overall pattern, so in Chinese medicine, it is not so much what *x* is causing to *y*, but rather, what the relationship of *x* to *y* is. A symptom, therefore is not traced back to a cause but is looked at as part of a totality. If a person displays a certain symptom, Chinese medicine wishes to discover how the symptom fits into that person's entire bodily pattern. A person who is well or "in harmony" has no distressing symptoms and expresses mental, physical, and spiritual balance. When the person is ill, the distressing symptom is only one part of a complete bodily imbalance that can be seen in other aspects of his or her life and behaviour.

In contrast, Western medicine, in keeping with the Western penchant for cause and effect, is concerned with isolatable disease categories or agents of disease, which it isolates and tries to change, control, or destroy. The physician usually starts with a symptom, then searches for an underlying mechanism that may be a possible cause for a disease. Although the disease may affect various parts of the body, it is a relatively well-defined self-contained phenomenon. Precise diagnosis frames an exact, quantifiable description of the illness, and a cause is then isolated.[68]

The basic premise on which Chinese medicine is based and its orientation in finding imbalances and "righting" them, makes it a likely preliminary basis to what Bahá'ís believe will be the healing methods of the future. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

> "The outer, physical causal factor in disease, however, is a disturbance in the balance, the proportionate equilibrium of all those elements of which the human body is composed. To illustrate: the body of man is a compound of many constituent substances, each component being present in a prescribed amount, contributing to the essential equilibrium of the whole. So long as these constituents remain in their due proportion, according to the natural balance of the whole—that is, no component suffereth a change in its natural proportionate degree

[68] Edward and Bouchier, *Davidson's Principles and Practice of Medicine.*

> and balance, no component being augmented or decreased—there will be no physical cause for the incursion of disease."[69]

According to Chinese medicine, biological rhythms get out of synchronization when there has been some violation of natural law, such as the practice of harmful habits, repression of emotions, or incorrect diet. Imbalance will result in diminishment or cessation of the "ch'i," a force or energy which may be equivalent to what 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls the "mind force":

> "The mind force—whether we call it pre-existent or contingent—doth direct and coordinate all the members of the human body, seeing to it that each part member duly performeth its own special function. If however, there be some interruption in the power of the mind, all the members will fail to carry out their essential functions, deficiencies will appear in the body and the functioning of its members, and the power will prove ineffective."[70]

In line with the principles of yin–yang, it is believed that ill health is not only a result of imbalance within parts of the body or of disharmony between the mind and the body but also something that can be brought about by an imbalance between the individual and the environment. *The Yellow Emperor's Classic* (*Inner Classic* or the *Huang-di Neijing*),[71] the source of all Chinese medical theory, the Chinese equivalent of the Hippocratic corpus, taught that the winds and seasons have marked effects on the human body, certain physical conditions being the response to terrestrial forces. The *Inner Classic* maintained that it was crucial for human beings to act in accordance with the seasons so as to avoid disharmony, for each person breathes the breath of the universe, tastes its atmosphere, and reflects its rhythm. Interestingly, modern medicine is now beginning to investigate the effect of atmospheric and meteorological conditions on the human organism, and it has been shown that the number of breaths each person draws varies according to the time of the year. Much like animals and insects (although less immediately apparent), human beings also respond to a circadian rhythm of sunlight. Humans

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[69] *Compilation of Compilations, 1*, p 465–67.

[70] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p 48.

[71] Compiled by unknown authors between 300 and 100 BC, it is the oldest of the Chinese medical texts.

also experience annual rhythms, and these have been observed in regular changes of bodyweight as well as in seasonal hair loss. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains this theory of interrelatedness:

> "For all beings are connected together like a chain; and reciprocal help, assistance and interaction belonging to the properties of things are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. It is confirmed through evidences and proofs that every being universally acts upon other beings, either absolutely or through association."[72]

Since the primary objective of Chinese medicine is to restore the balance in the body and since each body is different, individualized treatment therefore becomes one of its distinguishing features.[73] Treatment is tailored to the needs of the individual so as to maximize immunity to diseases and to achieve balance. Here, the Chinese physician directs his or her attention to the complete physiological and psychological individual. This diagnostic technique does not turn up a specific disease entity or a precise cause, but, rather, renders an almost poetic, yet workable, description of the whole person. The therapy then attempts to bring the configuration into balance, to restore harmony to the individual. In an attempt to discover a pattern of imbalance or disharmony in a patient's body, all relevant information, including the symptoms as well as the patient's other general characteristics, are gathered and woven together.

The validity of individualized treatment of a patient, rather than the uniform treatment of a disease, is acknowledged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

> "The skillful physician does not give the same medicine to cure each disease and each malady, but he changes remedies and medicines according to the different necessities of the disease and constitution."[74]

While the *Yellow Emperor's Classic* dealt with acupuncture, moxibustion, and surgery as means of restoring balance, one major way in which much healing is done is through herbal medicine or food. The Chinese have thus developed a complex classification of foods according to the yin–yang principle. Classification ranges from cold and cooling, to neutral, to

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[72] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 178–79.
[73] Individualized treatment is also a distinctive feature in Ayurvedic medicine.
[74] Abdu'l Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p 94.

warming and hot.[75] Things are also classified not only directly as yin or yang in nature but also relative to each other. Seaweeds, for example, are yin because they are passive plants that grow in the sea. Fish might also be considered yin because they live in the sea, but compared to seaweed, they are classified as yang because they are active animals.

The importance of food as a means of curing illnesses is referred to often in the Bahá'í scriptures:

> "When highly-skilled physicians shall fully examine this thoroughly and perseveringly, it will be clearly seen that the incursion of disease is due to a disturbance in the relative amounts of the body's component substances, and that treatment consisteth in adjusting these relative amounts, and that this can be apprehended and made possible by means of foods."[76]

Because "medical science appears to be in its infancy,"[77] not least because many major diseases are treated primarily by invasive surgery, Bahá'ís are encouraged to "develop the science of medicine to such a high degree that they will heal illnesses by means of foods."[78] While it will necessarily take some time before the emergence of such a medical paradigm, in the meantime Bahá'ís are advised to refer to qualified doctors and submit to current medical opinion.

Despite some promising similarities between Chinese and Bahá'í perceptions of health and healing, there is one essential difference—for the Bahá'í, while medical treatment and a skilled doctor may cure a patient, the actual healer is really God.[79] For the Chinese, this is not so much a relevant point in the practice of healing. What the ultimate cause of healing is is not as important as the fact that the patient is healed. In

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[75] In general, foods which grow or live in ponds, lakes, streams, rivers, seas and oceans are colder or more cooling than those which grow on land. Watercress, seaweeds, fish and all kinds of seafood, e.g., have cold or cooling natures, while carrots, leeks, eggs, chicken and red meats have warming or hot natures. The natures of all foods can be changed by the way they are cooked. If watercress is stir-fried for example, it is less cooling than when it is boiled in a soup. And when chicken is steamed it is less "heating" than when it is grilled.

[76] *Compilation of Compilations, 1*, p 465–67.

[77] Ibid., p 473–74.

[78] Ibid., p 468.

[79] Ibid.

Chinese medicine, there is also less emphasis on the spiritual or prayerful aspect of healing.[80]

7. Conclusion

The four principles inherent in yin–yang cosmology—relativity, unity, complementarity, and balance—have gone a long way in influencing Chinese ideas where the origin of creation, the nature of history, the relationship between men and women, and health and healing are concerned. What is of significance to us in this dialogue is the conceptual similarity of these principles in relation to the Bahá'í Faith despite its birth separate in time and place. In both the Chinese cosmological worldview and the Bahá'í Faith, the idea of the Unknowability of the Creator and the gradual development of life on earth is present. In addition, while attempting to explain the process of creation, the Bahá'í Faith postulates two poles and four elements of creation, the former being similar in spirit to the yin and yang, while the latter is not unlike the Chinese "five phases." Yin-yang concepts have also endowed the Chinese with a capacity to interpret events in a larger historical or geographical perspective in terms of comparative religion and world unity and this viewpoint has much in synchrony with the Bahá'í Faith. Again in both worldviews, the relationship between the sexes, yin and yang, are represented symbolically as creative forces which when in complete balance result in harmony and prosperity. Ontologically, both male and female are viewed as forming a unity and are therefore equal and complementary. Last but not least, yin-yang cosmology has left its mark on Chinese medicinal theory which is based on the premise of finding imbalances and "righting" them. In this perspective, it is similar to what Bahá'ís believe will be the healing methods of the future. One can only conclude from this preliminary dialogue that despite the chasm of time and space which separates the origins of the Chinese cosmological worldview and the Bahá'í Faith, the conceptual affiliation of many key principles is striking and merits further investigation.

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[80] On the popular level, however, many believed that diseases were caused by sins or visitations.

Future research is needed to investigate the significant correlation of the principles and spirit of the Bahá'í Faith with traditional paradigms of thinking in Chinese culture. The multifarious theories of causation and evolution and relationships between all created things in the universe in Chinese philosophical thought, the theoretical relationship between man and women and its practical application in Chinese philosophy and literary texts, the principle of unity in ordering political and social life, and last but not least, a more detailed systematic examination of the intricate correlation between Chinese and Bahá'í medical principles are all vital, timely and relevant areas of detailed study for future scholars.

Meanwhile, the yin–yang paradigm remains a useful one to explain cultural imbalance as we stand on the threshold of the millennium. In the past, yang has been favoured over yin, and the present world seems to have reached a point of great imbalance in social, ecological, moral, and spiritual terms. Despite having given birth to the yin–yang theory, a completing rather than a competing theory, present-day China is also not spared from a disjointed view of human life, which attempts to divorce faith from reason and which has departed from the traditional attitude of tolerance to one of dogmatic discrimination and ideological opposition, an extremely yang condition.

Nevertheless, the fact that we are witnessing the beginning of a "New Age" seems to illustrate the idea that yang, having reached its peak, is now in retreat. Among the laws governing change and nature for the Chinese, the most fundamental is, after all, that which states, "When a thing reaches one extreme, it reverts from it."[81] "New age" ideas are gaining popularity, and there is, for instance, a rising concern with ecology, a strong interest in mysticism, a growing feminine awareness, and a rediscovery of holistic approaches to health and healing.[82]

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[81] See Rene Wadlow, "Are we on the threshold of a New Age?" *Light Voices*, 4, 2, 1999, pp. 7-8. In addition, there are common Chinese sayings, which may be derived from Lao-tzu: "Returning is the motion of Tao," and, "To be far is to return." The idea is that if anything develops certain extreme qualities, those qualities invariably change into their opposites.

[82] See Rene Wadlow, "Are we on the threshold of a New Age?" *Light Voices*, 4, 2, 1999, pp. 7-8.

'Abdu'l-Bahá elucidated on this phenomenon when he said, at the beginning of this century, that the "new age" will be "an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more properly balanced." While the world in the past has been ruled by force, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says, the balance is already shifting and force appears to be losing its dominance to mental alertness, intuition, and the spiritual qualities of love and service: "Hence the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced."[83]

A fundamental renewal of society thus appears to be gradually taking place. The pendulum of balance appears to be at work. The Mean is once again seen as an attractive standard. The writings of Bahá'u'lláh affirm that the new world order is being built, one characterized by the unification of the planet into one commonwealth; and by the reunification, we may say, of the yin and yang principles as equal co-partners in the world of existence, united in the principle of the Tao, the life-giving power.

This time in world history appears to be a watershed era, marked by radical shifts in viewpoints. The world is being inexorably transformed into a global society in which many different cultures and peoples are coming together; often for the first time. Little wonder then that the first year of the new millennium has been termed as the year of "Dialogue among Civilizations" by the United Nations. There is a recognition that bridges need to be built between different traditions and that each holds an aspect of truth. Bahá'í revelation is little researched but it is vital to go into depth in such research to get a fuller appreciation of Bahá'í teachings. Likewise, the Chinese contributions to an alternative psychological viewpoint and scientific tradition have been overlooked by Eurocentric scientific views. Once the value of dialogue is widely accepted, it is likely that different psychological and scientific traditions will be able to learn and benefit from each other. No civilization is distinct or self-contained and connections are remarkably plenteous if one looks for them. The Chinese civilization has had its ups and downs, its highs and lows, its yin and yang phases; yet its ancient precepts remain embedded in the psyche

[83] J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, p 149.

of its people and remain relevant for discussion today. While there is no Bahá'í civilization as yet, Bahá'ís themselves believe there will be one in the future and feel that dialogue regarding such a civilization is meaningful. Even at this initial point in time, similarities can be discerned as we take our first steps towards the Chinese-Bahá'í dialogue on the origin of matter, the nature of history, male–female relationships, and health and healing.

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Dialogue Among Civilizations: Ancient and Future, Transitions and Potentials

Theo A. Cope

Abstract

The dialogue between the ancient Chinese civilization and the nascent Bahá'í civilization is in its beginning phase. We note in the Chinese system many images and ideas that resonate with Bahá'í thought and enable us to examine how this very old civilization contemplated the role of embodiment and transformation. This article briefly examines some similarities as found in a meditation upon the *Book of Changes* 《易经》. It then highlights the differences that exist between western and Chinese philosophical thought, drawing out how these ideas are similar to what we find in Bahá'í philosophy, while transcending them. It will present brief considerations of language, epistemology, and ontological foundations. Further, it will look at the notion of embodiment as presented in the Chinese view of the noble person, the *junzi*, from Confucianism, as well as its presentation in Bahá'í thought. Finally it will consider the place of filial piety and world civilization in the two systems. It is contended that these motifs, themes and images in Chinese culture that resonate with the Bahá'í Faith lie at the roots of the Chinese psyche. In Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, we find the re-expression of these truths since they are what are needed to re-vitalize and re-animate human civilizations and transform them from the materialistic basis that is dominant to one founded upon spiritual principles. In order to perform this, the roots of our soul need to be reactivated and it is the Power of the Manifestation, we are told, that can best effectuate this collective transformation to the stage of maturity.

1. New and Old

If we simply state that all civilizations are undergoing great transition, we speak nothing novel. Most people living will assert such a truism. If we, on the other hand, assert that we are living in the midst of and witnessing the destruction of civilizations and the consequent rebirth of civilizations, we speak a thought that echoes through the veils of time. Chinese thought, as embodied in the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes*, and myriad other philosophical treatises in its history, recognizes the implicit cycles of ascent and descent of civilizations. Likewise, Bahá'í thought presents for our consideration the fact of the birth of a new civilization founded upon spiritual premises and principles, and the destruction of civilizations founded upon materialistic premises. We are at the dawning of such a process, and it is at dawn that one centers oneself and decides the events of the future.

This paper will briefly examine the congruence of Bahá'í and Chinese thought as it pertains to metaphysics, humanity and the earth. In fact, what I hope to express clearly is how Chinese philosophy strove and how Bahá'í thought enables us to live an embodied metaphysics, a metaphysics that demands action, that cannot be separated from living, from building and maintaining civilization. In this way, we are enabled to glimpse how it is that the Bahá'í Faith, as enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi, reach back through the veils of time in activating modes of being that have strong resonance in the human psyche, while at the same time propelling us into a more mature contemplation of these modes. This dialogue, then, will permit us to know why and how we can live a life characterized as "personified intellect and embodied spirit." [1]

This embodiment is the hallmark of both Chinese civilization's roots, and core of the nascent and future Bahá'í civilization. The images, symbols and motifs we find in the Bahá'í corpus have a deep resonance with myriad symbolic systems throughout the world. We should not find this surprising since religion seeks to transform the human psyche from its total involvement with physical life to a life characterized by a connection with the spiritual order informing mundane existence. Symbols serve the human soul in its process of transformation by serving as foci for such

[1] 'Abdu'l-Bahá *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 88.

changes. In order to implement a global civilization, the Bahá'í religion seeks to transform the myriad human societies from their concern with limited national interests to planetary perspectives, and the personal to the collective, without thereby losing individuality. The differentiation of the particular unit is a vital process; it must be accomplished by an integration with the universal so that a mature stage of development is achieved. By reaching back through the depths of time, this religious system (the Bahá'í Faith) awakens and transmutes symbolic systems, revitalizing them and infusing them with new energy. Such revitalization strikes to the core of human psychospiritual being, activating modes of being that have been cast aside. These powers are ones that ennoble the individual and enable her or him to attain self-mastery. Through self-mastery, one enters a dialogue with others on different grounds, on equal footing. Equal footing enables social cohesiveness and development along peaceful lines.

These lines of dialogue are followed by many scholars pursuing a Chinese-Western debate, though without the spiritual and religious implications addressed by the Bahá'í position. It is contended that the Bahá'í Faith provides for our edification and spiritual transformation by presenting a clear principle in the Bahá'í Writings that explains this simply and clearly. Bahá'u'lláh says,

> "From the heaven of God's Will, and for the purpose of ennobling the world of being and of elevating the minds and souls of men, hath been sent down that which is the most effective instrument for the education of the whole human race. The highest essence and most perfect expression of whatsoever the peoples of old have either said or written hath, through this most potent Revelation, been sent down from the heaven of the Will of the All-Possessing, the Ever-Abiding God."[2]

One reason why we find within the Bahá'í corpus such resonating concepts is because they are what are needed for the transformation of the individual, spiritually and psychologically. Once transformed, the individual then proceeds to effect transformation within societies, with transformation ultimately extending throughout the entire world system. The loss of true interconnection with the cosmos, and interconnection with others has resulted in a fragmented world system. The time we are

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[2] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 95.

living in is truly an "Age of Transition" from a world of divided, self-seeking nations to a world federation. "The tumult of this age of transition is characteristic of the impetuosity and irrational instincts of youth, its follies, its prodigality, its pride, its self-assurance, its rebelliousness, and contempt of discipline."[3] Bahá'u'lláh, so he claims, has brought what is needed for the passage of the species from a stage characterized as adolescent to that of maturity. The words he used were what the collective species of humanity has used in its attempts to order life. Bahá'u'lláh's languages were Arabic and Persian, though the concepts he used were universal. The archetypal nature of these concepts are such that they resonate with the deepest chords of the human psyche, from distinct and diverse civilizations, beliefs, and time periods.

Let us not be naïve and assume that what we find within the Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist texts were universally or fairly applied in China. The beauty they aspire to, the injunctions they enjoin, the virtues they inculcate, remained limited in application and inaccessible to the majority. More than this, some were misused by the minority that theoretically held to them, used for control or manipulation of an uneducated population. The feudal bureaucratic system established by Confucians, and the changes in Buddhist texts to entice the population to donate to monasteries, indicate how these systems were adapted for socio-economic purposes.[4]

Chinese philosophers, especially after the rise of Neo-Confucianism, held to the universality of their ideas, and ascribed a superiority to their cultural views compared to the 'barbaric' western nations. This system offered a code of conduct and virtues to delineate it, but no belief system. Taoist thought offers these components, but the belief system is transpersonal only inasmuch as the Tao (道) is transpersonal. The debate currently among modern scholars is to what degree the Tao can be said to be transpersonal in a transcendent meaning. It is transpersonal in that it transcends the individual but its transcendental aspect is questionable. Buddhism proffered a code of belief, but by the time it reached China, it had undergone many transformations and interpretations, and many

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[3] Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 117.

[4] For a detailed look at the relation of early Chinese Buddhism and socio-economics, see Liu, Xinru, *Ancient India and Ancient China: Trade and Religious Exchanges*.

superstitions were overlaid onto it. The intermingling of Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist philosophies indicates the fluidity, harmony, and, at times, tension that existed in Chinese thought. Each system impacted the other, flavored the language and philosophical concerns, and often vied for priority in the society. There was often a large gap between the religious hierarchy and popular religious thought, with the popular level blending all three indiscriminately. With the transformations of time and interaction with other nations, these Chinese notions were forced to change.[5] In contemporary China, these roots are unknown by the majority, but they lay at the core of their psychological being.

This in no way belittles these concepts' immense value for "rectifying conduct," acquiring virtues, or pondering how one becomes a stable and mature being within the midst of change and chaos. Perhaps the restatement of such concepts within a new religious system is due to their unplumbed value for humanity; this time, these symbols and ideas come with the power required to effect such change within the hearts. It derives from a Divine Power born of God, we are told. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the son of Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, informs a potential teacher of the Chinese that they "must be imbued with their spirit, know their sacred literature, study their national customs, and speak to them from their own standpoint and using their own terminologies."[6] One reason for this is that the Chinese views are profound in their wisdom, and detailed in the mannerisms of personal transformation. Based on a desire to maintain order within change, Chinese philosophical thought contributes greatly to our understanding the necessary psychological processes and demands for such transformation. It takes a power transcending the human realm to transmute effectively and on a large scale the natural impulses and instinctual drives of human beings in order to implement the ideals embodied in Chinese philosophy on a social scale. Divine Revelation proffers to humanity such a power, one that transcends and yet is immanent within the realm of humanity. A personal relationship with the Logos principle, the Manifestation of God, is what revealed religions offer to facilitate such transmutation. The Bahá'í Faith offers a code of

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[5] For a good discussion of this transition and its impact on and within Confucian philosophy, see J. R. Levenson, *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, Berkley. This book is a compiled work of Levenson's three works, thus the three dates.

[6] Cited in *Star of the West*.

conduct, a code of virtues, as well as a code of beliefs in a transpersonal, transcendental order that provides a personal relationship as well. [7]

2. Order and Change

Richard Wilhelm, an early German scholar, wrote much regarding the *I Ching*, the *Book of Changes* (*Yijing*) and even translated the work into German. The eight primary trigrams of the *I Ching*, composed of three lines each, either broken or solid, combine in various manners to compose the 64 hexagrams, each with six lines, and have "very interesting psychological implications." [8] These trigrams are "symbols standing for transitional states; they are images that are constantly undergoing change." [9] In order to grasp the meanings behind these images, time and contemplation are required. Kongzi is recorded to have stated when he was already an old man, "If I could add 50 years to my life, I would study the Changes and become free of error." [10] This work is a treasure house of symbols. "Symbols are representations, speaking of one thing to allude to something else." [11] The *I Ching* is an ancient symbolic system used for myriad purposes through thousands of years of time; it has impacted many civilizations, but perhaps none as deeply as the Chinese. It impacted the 18th century German philosopher Leibniz, and the arrangement of his binary system, and through him changed aspects of Western thought. It is this binary system that is at the roots of computer technology.

In the historical presentation of the *I Ching*, there are two circular arrangements of importance. The "Earlier Heaven," or "Primal Arrangement," is attributed to Fu Xi, a legendary sage who is also given the credit for designing the eight trigrams. These symbols were derived before Kongzi and before the Zhou Dynasty. They are set out in a pattern, similar to the Later Heaven Arrangement as given below, but these

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[7] This trichotomous code is derived from Ci, Jiwei, *Dialectic of the Chinese Revolution: From Utopianism to Hedonism*.

[8] Wilhelm, R. "Lectures on the I Ching: Constancy and Change" in *Understanding the I Ching: The Wilhelm Lectures on the Book of Changes*, p. 164.

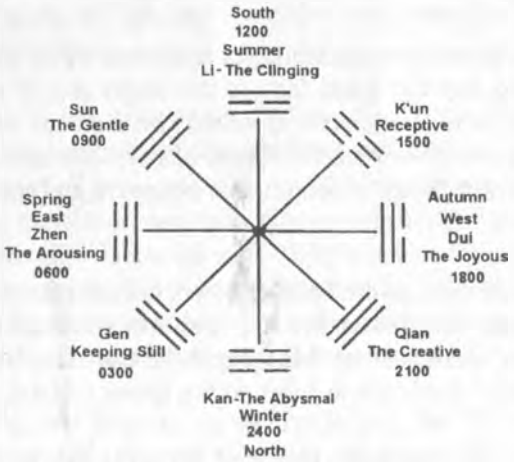
[9] Wilhelm, R. *The I Ching, or Book of Changes*, p. li.

[10] *Lunyu*, 7:16, A.C. Muller.

[11] Chang Po-Tuan, *Inner Teachings of Taoism*, trans. T. Cleary, in *The Taoist Classics: The Collected Translations of Thomas Cleary*, Vol. 2, p. 266.

trigrams are arranged differently. The arrangement is set up as polarities with each trigram's "opposite." Each trigram is characterized as male or female, and is given a "family" placement consisting of the father, mother, three male, and three female offspring, along with myriad natural symbols.

According to the "Later Heaven," or "Inner-World" Arrangement, a method for diagramming the trigrams attributed to King Wen of the Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 BC), the trigrams are presented as they unfold in the temporal progression in the world. A meditation upon these present an arrangement such that these symbols become placed in the sequence of time: daily time.



The Later Heaven or Inner-World Arrangement of King Wen

Thus, we note that each of these trigrams can describe different states of psychological bearing, and each stage lasts three hours, with the climax at the mid point, that is, 1½ hours into the particular period. We have, for example the time period from 4:30 am to 7:30 am, with the climax at 6:00 am. This coincides with sunrise and is explained in the Commentary of the *I Ching* as "God comes forth in the sign of the Arousing" and the

arousing is the trigram *chen/zhen*, the eldest son that symbolizes awakening, thunder and a host of other images. It represents new movement of life:

> "The sun rises, morning slowly dawns, and things attain reality. At first, only psychic, innermost elements are awakened to life; the shell of sleep is cast off. But this casting off is the first budding connection with the outside world. And here, immediately at the beginning of day, an act of conscious decision must take place. For at the first movement of life, things are still far removed from us, but just because they are far we must influence the budding beginnings of the surrounding world in such a way as to permit only the approach of what is suitable for us. The trigram, the Arousing, is very suitable for us. And the nature of its activity determines the way events of the surrounding world will take shape for us."[12]

Here we see a symbolic explanation, as presented by an ancient culture, of a very profound psychological fact: at the beginning of each day, as our awareness returns to the terrestrial world, we need to make a conscious choice to align ourselves with the forces of life, with spirit. Likewise, we note very clearly in Baha'i thought that believers are enjoined and given this advice:

> "Blessed is he who, at the hour of dawn, centring his thoughts on God, occupied with His remembrance, and supplicating His forgiveness, directeth his steps to the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar and, entering therein, seateth himself in silence to listen to the verses of God..."[13]

This Mashriqu'l-Adhkar is the House of Worship, the term literally means "Dawning Place of Remembrance." It is not just a religious edifice, but a social institution offering benefit to humanity. Currently there are seven such Houses of Worship, each on different continents. Each of these buildings is the center of the social institution that will provide care for all peoples, regardless of belief, nationality or gender. Each is built with nine doors, symbolizing the openness to all directions of the planet and the major religions of the world.

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[12] Wilhelm, Lectures, op. cit., pg. 165. The following diagram has been modified from this same work.

[13] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, pg. 61

Lest we think this is only a physical location, we are provided an understanding that transcends place. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that: "In reality pure hearts are the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar and from them the voice of supplication and invocation continually reach the Supreme Concourse."[14] So, we are given to understand that the individual enters the symbolic heart and there communes. This entering is focused upon meditation and prayer, a communion with the interior reality of existence. Through these actions, the heart is purified, the behavior is rectified, and the personal is made to harmonize with the social and cosmic. We witness here a symbol apt for an embodied metaphysics, a metaphysics that is intimately connected with daily living, self transformation, and ultimately transformation of the world. The Supreme Concourse is a Bahá'í term that refers to the spiritual world, and we are told that the spiritual world exists "within this world."[15] No separation except in our physical dimension is conceived for these worlds; the separation is only in our thinking and perceiving.

Following the *I Ching* placements further, we notice that, in the same Later Heaven Arrangement of the trigrams, the trigram *ch'ien/qian* (乾) stands in the position of night, 8:30 to 10:30 pm. *Qian* is the Creative, characterized as the father, and the *I Ching* states: "God does battle in the sign of the Creative."[16] Wilhelm adds: "The work of the day is done; with pleasure and joy things have been concluded. But now the question arises: has this day been of productive value, or was it a petty emptiness? Hence the Creative, because man must justify himself."[17]

In a similar vein, we find an injunction in the Bahá'í Writings: "Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for

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[14] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Vol. 3, p. 678.
[15] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 195.
[16] Wilhelm, H. *Heaven, Earth, and Man in the Book of Changes*, p. 39. This book is a collection of a series of seven lectures given at the Eranos Meetings held in Switzerland. It is interesting to note that the word in this commentary for God is the Chinese word *Ti* and occurs only at this point in the Book of Changes. It has a similar meaning to the divine, *divus*, in Latin and often referred to a ruler.
[17] op. cit., p. 171.

death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds."[18]

From these short passages from Chinese and from Bahá'í thought, we observe the injunction and advice to center our thoughts, during the hours of dawn, and make a connection with the deep roots of existence. To center oneself, to contemplate, with the heart and dawn as the place and time of remembrance, enables us to profoundly reconnect with the spiritual dimension of life, and to do so when the day first begins so that we may order and choose the response we might maintain as the day unfolds. This centering permits us to have conscious response-ability to the day's events. Likewise, to review the progress or events of the day permits one to examine behaviors, thoughts and deeds that impact the world and self. It is striking that in both views the same message is spoken. In the Bahá'í Faith, we are given symbolic images that connect with the deep recesses of our being and, in the *I Ching* we discover how these symbols were envisioned before. Each system has as an integral component a centering of the self within the spiritual, and a daily examination of the self.

3. Maturity and Metaphysics

This transition of time and consciousness, this centering one's thoughts and making conscious decisions, as well as taking conscious account of our actions, heralds us into the stance of maturity. It takes a mature being to attain such an awareness, and this is not dependent upon chronological age. It is noteworthy here that Bahá'u'lláh has set the age of maturity, with respect to religious duties, at age 15 years. This imposes upon all at and above such age a conscious awareness and responsibility of our daily activities, and for one at such a young chronological age, portends much for psychological development. The Bahá'í Faith has as one of its central premises that humanity, collectively, is now embarked upon this stage of evolution and that Bahá'u'lláh brought the spiritual power required for humanity to attain this stage of collective and personal maturity.

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[18] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 31.

A mature understanding requires that we fully realize the fact that the Eastern and Western civilizations held metaphysical views which relied upon ancient thought, and developed differently. Thus, in the West, all proponents of such views looked backwards to Plato, Aristotle, or Plotinus and Neoplatonism for proof of their suppositions; in China, all Confucians receded to Kongzi or Mengzi to negate speculative views, while the Taoists went to Lao Zi or Zhuangzi to bolster their views. While the Confucian school did not develop views that were construed to be as metaphysical as the Taoists, it was an inevitable later development, given the mutual influences and the passage of time. [19]

Bahá'u'lláh, on the other hand, overturns many such formative ideas and presents a re-visioned view of those ideas that we witness in Western as well as Chinese civilization and philosophy. In order to approach this, let us begin by also looking back, but do so with full awareness and intent to re-think these ideas.

Chinese metaphysics has been called "the least metaphysical of all metaphysics or is non-metaphysical" compared to Greek, that is Western, metaphysics.[20] If this is true, then we should be able to differentiate these two metaphysical views with some clarity, briefly address a Bahá'í stance, and thus establish a further dialogue among civilizations. Indeed, this can be done with simplicity. To pursue these ideas deeply will lead us astray from our intent of a Bahá'í-China dialogue. The interested reader may turn to the many sources available to verify or negate the truthfulness of such views.

First, Chinese and Greek languages differ greatly, the former being image based, the latter phonetic. Among contemporary scholars, Cheng asserts that the phonetic basis of Greek language has nothing in it "to suggest the presence of sensible objects."[21] As such, the Greek language contributed

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[19] The influence of Buddhist thought in this arena, in similar motifs presented and images used, is vital to grasp, but is outside the scope of this brief article. Sim Tze Hong's article in this publication holds many insights. Also, see A. Khursheed's article commenting on the influence of Buddhism in Chinese philosophy, "Science and Religion in Chinese Culture," in *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, especially, pp. 147-154.

[20] Cheng, C. "Chinese Metaphysics as Non-metaphysics: Confucian and Taoist Insights into the Nature of Reality" in *Understanding the Chinese Mind: The Philosophical Roots*, ed. Allinson, R, p. 167.

[21] Cheng, op. cit., p. 167.

to far greater abstract thought, greatly divorced from practical empirical reality. Greek thought searched for Being, that is, the nature of the One, or the Unmoved Mover. Christianity took up this quest with the nature of God, the Logos (Word), the interrelation between these and this world of temporal existence. This world was the domain of becoming, and as such held for Greek thought little value for truth. The search for permanency was the ideal Greek quest, epitomized by Plato and his *Eidos*, the Platonic Ideas that were supposed to exist in a "supercelestial place." For Plato and his successors, these ideas were the Universal Forms of each Particular existing thing. The transitory particular derived its nature from the permanent universal which was conceived as a static reality. These universals contained no matter, and how something that contained no matter could engender things with such matter was a severe challenge to later philosophers. Aristotle refuted his teacher's notion, but held to the assertion that there were universals; however, these universals derived their existence after the particulars. The debates over universals versus particulars or essence over existence is the hallmark of many Western philosophical theses. The nature of Greek language lent itself to abstract thought more divorced from physical reality, thus these debates, centered upon rhetorical truth, could likewise be divorced from any mandate for living. In fact, the Platonic ideal for the philosopher was epitomized in his myth of the Cave.

The Chinese language, being character based, derived the characters' images from physical reality and the Chinese philosophers were thus constantly reminded of the connection to the world and society. Chinese thought never separated the sensible world from the spiritual, earth from heaven. Chinese thinkers saw in the changes of physical nature the permanent feature of existence: change. These philosophers did not retreat from change to seek an underlying permanency: they embraced it as a fact of being, and a manner of knowing. The lack of terminological clarity in their writings was a reflection of the lack of conceptual clarity they knew could be attributed to any permanent delineation of existence. More than this, each character contained a physical *and* abstract referent; meaning is pluralistic. In part this was due to the fact that early Chinese thinkers did not have the interest in logical debates in the same way as we see in the Greeks, and realized that human understanding is limited by language.

We also find arguments that assert an opposite viewpoint to Cheng's, however, and warrant our attention. Even though his view is one that was widely held, there exist views to counter this understanding and seem to be warranted. Significant here is a comment by A.C. Graham in his work, *Unreason within Reason,*[22] where mention is made of this "fallacy." While it is true that the phonetic script contains less a concrete referent, and the Chinese characters present a composite (concrete and psychological) referent, the reason lies not in script, but in philosophical orientation. The practically-minded Confucian tradition was based upon knowledge as being empirically oriented and scholarly. "The nature of this knowledge was not theoretical and abstract, but concrete and factual."[23] Hansen likewise asserts that while western language is construed "as descriptive or representative, Chinese theory treats the function of language as socializing, regulating, and co-ordinating behavior."[24] If Cheng's contention were true, then we should expect to not see the presence of abstract metaphysical thought within Chinese philosophy, but this is clearly not the case. If we just consider two of the Classics, the *Doctrine of the Mean* (*zhongyong:* 中庸) and the *Great Learning* (*daxue:* 大学), both attributed to the Qin or early Han dynasty (222 BC – 220 AD) it is clearly seen that while the latter is concerned with social and political issues, the former is more focused on psychology and metaphysics, or as Wing-tsit Chan expresses, it is "religious and mystical."[25] Furthermore, the Neo-Taoist tradition that began in the third century AD, perhaps due to the chaos and turmoil in the Wei Dynasty (220-265 AD), shows us much abstract thinking and flights from the "real world" of fact. The introduction and translation of Buddhism into Chinese culture never reduced its abstractions, and its impact on the Confucians and Taoists prompted these systems to speculate more metaphysically. Perhaps we can safely assert that the *Analects* of the Confucian canon reveals little abstract use of language, but the *Doctrine of the Mean* and later Neo-Confucian thought assuredly do, as do Taoism and Buddhism.

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[22] Ill: Open Court, 1992, p. 152.
[23] Schwartz, "Some Polarities in Confucian Thought," in *Confucianism in Action*, ed. Nivision & Wright, p. 58.
[24] Hansen, C., "Language in the Heart-Mind," in *Understanding the Chinese Mind*, p. 77
[25] Chan, W. *Historical Charts of Chinese Philosophy*, notes to chart 1.

The difference between Greek and Chinese language systems, then, is that they both used words and different styles of logic, but for different purposes. Its application is what matters most, and the systematic manner in which it is applied.

The sophist thinker Hui Shi (380-305 BC?), friend of Zhuangzi, attempted to attain understanding of the great One by the use of logic and rational knowledge, but the former was opposed to Kung-sun Lung (b. 380 BC?) another thinker who attempted to use logic as well. Hui Shi saw all things as relative and constantly changing, while Kung-sun Lung taught that they were absolute and permanent. Wing-tsit Chan asserts that this trend towards logical and rational understanding did not catch hold in China due to the disinterestedness of the philosophers in the science of logic as well as the political upheaval during this time. "Moreover, the common emphasis of the major schools on solving human problems, as well as the attempts of some thinkers to strive for social reform, made the Logicians look like idle debaters."[26] This trend towards logic, began by Mozi (Mo-tzu), founder of Mohism, and carried on by the "Logicians," failed to capture an arena because it failed to win the people's hearts.

Schwartz presents a good discussion of the similarities and differences between Greek and Chinese philosophers.[27] First, the Greeks wanted stability; the Chinese witnessed flux. Greek thought focused on the divide between these realms, Chinese thought strove for harmony and integrity. Chinese philosophy arose within the context of politics and ethics, not merely the "rectification of names" by describing particular functions or causes of things. While it is also true that Greek thinkers conceived of the ideal social and political order, it was projected into a mythical future; Chinese thinkers looked to their past in the Xia or Zhou Dynasties as their model. Even when the Chinese thinkers spoke of some standard of cause or behavior, the locus was *Tian* (天: often translated as "Heaven," though better left untranslated) not the transcendental realm of pure form we find in Greek thought, but an embodied principle that is reflected in the sage-kings' lives, and eventually accessible to all. Tao is not a transcendent force, but an immanent field of reference; it is the Way *and* the path upon which one walks.

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[26] Chan, W., *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, p. 233.
[27] Schwartz, B. *The World of Thought in Ancient China*.

Second, Greek thought and its Western inheritors construed the role of the spiritually-minded philosopher and mystic to be aloof from society, to be unconcerned with its unfolding, and to remain detached from its needs. Plato's "Cave Allegory" provides the best example of the philosopher's perceived role. Chinese philosophers, even of the Taoist school, viewed humanity as being intimately connected with "Tian," Earth and all of humanity, and realized that the individual is a social being. This implies that one fulfil one's "experience of the cultivation of one's nature toward the fulfilment of oneself and others in society" which is the principle of ethical fulfilment.[28] Greek civilization sought the elevation and isolation of the individual, the "Alone with the Alone" of Neoplatonism, while Chinese civilization and thought never lost the immediacy of relationships, social and cosmic. For the Confucian school, the scholar, who was in service of the bureaucracy, strove to integrate his inner moral character with his impact upon the social order. In fact, the bureaucratic system in China was, in theory, created for this very purpose. It is true that certain aspects of Taoism, such as what was seen in Neo-Taoism, proposed isolation over social ties; however, these views never dominated in the same way as Confucian ideology. We do know that in the Early and Late Han dynasties, the upsurge in Buddhist monasteries contributed to this social withdrawal and breaking of family ties and presented a challenge to the Chinese filial system.

Third, epistemology, the theory of knowledge, differs. Greek thought construed a view that thought and idea were the same, and equated thinking with being. It mattered not if thought and being—that is, lived being—were identical; it was enough that thought and idea were. The great quest was ontology, which produces different results depending upon the ascribed nature of *being*. There existed realms of being superior to this human realm, and in one of these realms, there existed the archetypes, the Platonic *eidos*, the ideas. These archetypes, such as Love, Truth, Beauty, Justice, etc., were observed in the world, but originated in a realm far beyond it. The value lay not necessarily in embodying these, but in contemplating them detached from all concern for this world. The cosmological order established these patterns and the philosopher or mystic experienced them. This has, of course, created many problems for

[28] Cheng, op. cit., p. 180.

philosophical thought and western civilization that has never been reconciled. The unity that was conceived to exist in reality was not perceived in the world, but in abstractions; the world could provide no certain truths. These Greek philosophical discussions greatly influenced Christian and Islamic doctrines.

Chinese thought witnessed principles (*li:* 理) in nature, including human nature, and believed that an individual must strive to apply these into daily life for them to have real personal value. The one who embodies humanity/benevolence *(ren:* 仁) becomes the noble person *(jun zi:* 君子). The practical was fused with the cosmological and gave rise to the theoretical. Knowledge was based upon this practicality and concerned itself with life as lived, no matter how abstract thought became. Thought and action were wedded, and derived from "investigation into the nature of things" in the natural world, not the higher spheres of thought. "In Chinese philosophy, man not only develops a holistic outlook on the universe and man in the universe, but comes to see the dynamic unity of all things and experience the dynamic source of all things."[29] The epistemology that develops out of this conception embodies the intention of the individual. "Whenever man has to learn to know the world by his actual engagement with the world in his conduct and action, at the same time he has to learn to act according to his knowledge of the world."[30] This implies that one *becomes* one's thought, in the fullest implications.

This discussion could be lengthened, but hopefully it suffices. It needs commenting here that we are looking at the roots of systems of thought, and not whole philosophical systems. It is noticeable that in Bahá'í thought, both lines of speculation can be found. The dominant view, however, is on the integration of thought and being; in order to help transform another, one must be transformed first.

To speak of a non-metaphysical metaphysics may seem to be mere academic or philosophical word play. It is far from it, however. It is first and foremost practical and embodied. If we peruse this further, extending it to large cosmological views, we must face the concept of the Deity; call It God in whatever language and it still remains our concept. Western

[29] ibid., p. 173.
[30] ibid., p. 172.

religious thought, from the time of the Zoroastrian Religion (about 600 BC) also contended with a personification of an opposing force, Ahriman, Satan, Iblis; call it what we will, it still remains our concept. Chinese thought never witnessed such a split in its metaphysics, as the dark Yin force requires the light Yang force for essential balance. Dark and light were not opposites, but polar necessities. This world never became the domain of darkness with humans as pawns in a great cosmic drama. Bahá'u'lláh says little about this notion, other than to have us realize there is no such demonic entity: it is a symbol for the darkness that exists as a result of humanity's own misdeeds. We can never know light if we do not know darkness.

Taoism speaks much of the Unknowable that is termed Tao. It asserts that it is unnameable, yet offers various descriptions in the famous *Tao de Jing*. In Taoism, the *Zhuangzi* presents views of metaphysics which are conceived as a dynamic process, not a stable or fixed spiritual reality underlying existence. The Tao "is the formlessness which forms the form."[31] Spirit is not conceived to be something transcendental, for there is no *separate* metaphysical realm. The notion of interconnection, the absence of separateness, is characteristic of Taoist thought. Language cannot adequately express Reality, and the Taoists realized this early on. Words cannot convey Tao, and the limits of language are vociferously expressed.

The Confucian school, on the other hand, never asserts that the Tao is unnameable, but offers no definite description. From the Confucian tradition, Tao can be seen thusly:

1. The Tao is immanent in human history, culture and human practice; thus the Tao is both transcendent and immanent.
2. The Tao expresses itself in moral principles that we abide by, in rites and institutions within which we operate; thus, the Tao is the universal that is embodied in the particular.
3. The Tao is embodied in the ways of the ancient sage kings or present good rulers and princes, etc.; thus, the Tao is the universal that evolves historically.

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[31] *Chuang Tzu*, cited in Doeringer, F "Imaging the Imageless," in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, p. 10.

4. The Tao is the truth; in terms of it all other truths are understood and interpreted.
5. To understand Tao, one must reflect on what is near at hand, that is, what one experiences daily and culturally in real life. [32]

4. Bahá'í contributions to metaphysics and epistemology

If we briefly examine the Bahá'í position on the nature of philosophy, we will see a similar vibrancy as witnessed in Chinese thought. Even though Arabic and Persian, the two dominant languages of Bahá'u'lláh's writings are very amenable to abstraction, and in spite of the presence in his writings of names and phrases that are numerologically nuanced, Bahá'u'lláh himself focuses our attention on the living world, while enjoining us to integrate the abstract and concrete. He constantly enjoins us to study those branches of knowledge that do not "begin with words and end with words" [33] but contribute to the advancement of civilizations and peoples. Even though Bahá'u'lláh lived in a culture and spoke to an audience that was steeped in abstruse and obtuse metaphysics, he overturned this tendency and focused upon the rehabilitation of culture as the fairest fruit of religious thought. His concern was to bring unity to a world that was languishing because of divisions. The greatest of divisions that distressed his being was that of religious intolerance.

One of the fundamental purposes of this intolerance was the belief in the finality of religious truth. Adherents of the Abrahamic religions typically believed that their religion was *the only correct* religion, the others being false or incomplete.[34] Here we see the philosophical notion of permanence operating on and in western religious understanding. Contrariwise, Bahá'í thought presents us with certain essential principles: one is the constancy

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[32] Chen, Xunwu, "A Hermeneutical Reading of Confucianism," in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 27:1, p. 106. It is important to note that this rendering by Chen is a contemporary or "third wave" of Confucian hermeneutics.

[33] See, e.g. *Kitab-i-Aqdas, Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, where this is mentioned, referring to metaphysical hair splittings.

[34] It is worth noting here that Chinese religious systems never developed this insular view, and Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism often vied together and were blended together. Wing-tsit Chan discusses this in his article "The Historic Chinese Contribution to Religious Pluralism and World Community," in E. J. Jurgi, ed. *Religious Pluralism and World Community*, pp. 113-130.

of the Divinity in sending Messengers to guide humanity. Seen in this light there is no difference between any of the Prophets, they all speak the same Message, though the language and ideas may differ to suit the times and needs of the times in which they appear. They can be "regarded as one soul and the same person."[35] From a different perspective, "the principle of change is vindicated"[36] inasmuch as we notice change upon the earth, within the realm of thoughts and ideas, knowledge and ignorance, as well as change among the names, birth places, and themes of and expressed by each Prophet. It is unique to Bahá'í doctrine, among the Semitic religious traditions, to espouse the essential principles of permanency as well as change. In this manner, we may notice the bridging of Eastern and Western philosophical thought; Greek blending with Chinese in a harmony that transcends both.

Bahá'í philosophy and epistemology can be seen to be a gnosis, but not in the manner of gnosticism. It is a gnosis that is intimately integrated with transformation. In order to know, one must *become*. Of the truths embedded within Revelation we are told, "some can be disclosed only to the extent of the capacity of the repositories of the light of Our knowledge" which is a relative and progressive comprehension.[37] To know, one must *be engaged in transformation*. This is so because philosophy, the "love of wisdom," is a receptive sort of undertaking as well as active. "Sophia," translated as "wisdom," is feminine. It takes a receptive stance to realize that there are limits to rationality, it demands an openness to intuition, a realization that in order to learn, we must immerse ourselves in Revelation in order to "unravel its secrets, and discover all the pearls of wisdom that lie hid in its depths."[38] To understand we must be willing to "stand under" in a receptive mode of being. This wisdom has its limits; it revolves around the knowledge of the hidden dimension of our being, a sign of God, we are told. This "inner" dimension is a reflection of the divine.

Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá provide for us a directive regarding this search for understanding the Unknowable Reality underlying and informing creation:

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[35] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, (*The Book of Certitude*), p. 152.
[36] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of the Mysteries*, provisional translation by J. R. Cole.
[37] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 176.
[38] ibid., p. 136.

> "Having recognized thy powerlessness to attain to an adequate understanding of that Reality which abideth within thee, thou wilt readily admit the futility of such efforts as may be attempted by thee, or by any of the created things, to fathom the mystery of the Living God, the Day Star of unfading glory, the Ancient of everlasting days. This confession of helplessness which mature contemplation must eventually impel every mind to make is in itself the acme of human understanding, and marketh the culmination of man's development."[39]

> "That which we imagine is not the Reality of God; He, the Unknowable, the Unthinkable, is far beyond the highest conception of man." [40]

Not only do we discover that the knowledge of this Unknowable Reality is unattainable, but we also must humble ourselves before the profound realization that the Reality which is "within" us is beyond our comprehension. The Deity as proffered by Bahá'í thought is said to be transcendent in its Essence, but immanent in its manifestation; we are unable to say anything about Its true nature. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh asserts that It is "exalted beyond all proximity and remoteness."[41] Our language cannot adequately express this Reality, and whatever we may say is not about this Reality, but our limited and finite understanding. We do find passages that indicate immanence, such as, "Within every blade of grass are enshrined the mysteries of an inscrutable Wisdom..."[42] and an injunction to turn our sight to ourselves and find the Divinity "standing within thee."[43] Likewise we find passages indicative of transcendence. It seems clear from searching the Bahá'í Writings that we can neither assert nor deny absolute immanence or transcendence: these are our concepts, and the Reality they attempt to delimit is beyond our conceptual word plays. The limits of language is a certain proposition of Bahá'í thought. One fact is certain, however. The Deity as presented in the Bahá'í Scriptures is personal *through the intermediary of the Manifestation.*

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[39] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 165-166.
[40] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 25.
[41] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 185.
[42] ibid., p. 269.
[43] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, from the Arabic #13.

Another perspective that Kongzi realized centuries ago is echoed in the Bahá'í corpus. As Kongzi expressed, "Before you have learned to serve human beings, how can you serve spirits?"[44] We find this echoed in Chán thought as well. Concomitantly Bahá'u'lláh informs us that instead of pondering upon this Unknowable Reality we should instead "Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements."[45]

Epistemologically, the Bahá'í religion imposes upon us a standard of knowledge that honors the fullness of the embodied human. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives us the criteria humans have at our disposal to understand truth that are our foundation of epistemology: 1) sense perception; 2) rationality, reason; 3) tradition; and 4) inspiration. Individually applied, the conclusions arrived at are faulty, as clearly demonstrated through history. However, "a statement presented to the mind accompanied by proofs which the senses can perceive to be correct, which the faculty of reason can accept, which is in accord with traditional authority and sanctioned by the promptings of the heart, can be adjudged and relied upon as perfectly correct, for it has been proved and tested by all the standards of judgment and found to be complete. When we apply but one test, there are possibilities of mistake. This is self-evident and manifest."[46]

This epistemic foundation demands the integration of methods: those which are exclusively rational and those which are construed to be *a*rational. The western reliance upon reason, a characteristic harkening back to the Greek roots, re-expressed in the Renaissance with its humanistic overtones (in part impacted by the resurgence of Aristotelian philosophy), and the so-called Enlightenment, is counter-balanced in Bahá'u'lláh's world view. It is intriguing to note that Bahá'u'lláh lived merely half a century after the end of the Enlightenment. Reason has limits. It is important that we notice the counter-tendency appearing in the Islamic milieu that Bahá'u'lláh appeared within: the hailing of

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[44] *Analects* 11,11, trans. by DeBary W. and Bloom, I. in *Sources of Chinese Tradition* Vol 1, p. 54.
[45] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 213.
[46] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 255; see also *Some Answered Questions (SAQ)*, section 83.

imagination as a non-corrigible epistemological basis.[47] Never before in religious history had a prophetic figure to contend with and respond to two such highly developed philosophical systems, differing in that in one system, reason was stressed, and in the other, imagination. In fact, the traditions that Bahá'u'lláh dialogued with can be seen clearly in his writings. It is telling to note here that Chinese thinkers were averse to placing emphasis upon imagination and, in meditative techniques, encouraged the contemplator to keep the eyes opened slightly, focusing upon the "one square inch" as we find in Taoism and Chan Buddhism. This technique has many purposes, but one is exclusively to prevent the initiate from becoming lost in the images presenting themselves, or which one may construe to be reality. [48]

'Abdu'l-Bahá provides a perspective for our consideration that may have resonance with Chinese understanding, but requires more investigation to ascertain. We read: "The other kind of spiritual discoveries is made up of pure imaginations, but these imaginations become embodied in such a way that many simple-hearted people believe that they have a reality. That which proves it clearly is that from this controlling of spirits no result or fruit has ever been produced. No, they are but narratives and stories."[49] To delineate why and how this is so has been the thrust of much of my research and writing; to correlate it with Chinese thought remains a current and future endeavor. To integrate the fourfold approaches or criteria of truth, provides us with an epistemological thrust that has not been clearly articulated or delineated before.

Having expressed these fundamental points, we must pursue further to see if there is a metaphysic that Bahá'u'lláh brings for our consideration. We surely note the continuation of certain terms and views that held dominance in the Islamic world, however, if we search deeper, we notice a thrust towards an embodied metaphysics as well, more profound.

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[47] This trend was initiated in early Islamic thought, carried to its pinnacle in Sufism, specifically Ishraqi Sufism, whose prime motivators were Suhrawardi, Ibn 'Arabi, and their lineage.

[48] This is demonstrated in *The Secret of the Golden Flower*, trans. by R. Wilhelm, commented upon by Carl Jung, pp. 34-35. It is noteworthy that this work has been retranslated by T. Cleary and been challenged in its interpretation and commentary thereto. See Cleary, T. *The Secret of the Golden Flower*.

[49] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *SAQ*, section 71.

Bahá'u'lláh speaks of various worlds, such as the World of Creation, the World of Command, that is, the World of the Manifestations, and the World of God. This is symbolized clearly in the Bahá'í talisman of the "Greatest Name" referred to commonly as the "ringstone symbol." This emblem was designed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. We find it worn as a ring stone or pendant among many Bahá'í's. This design enables us to see dramatically and simply that the World of Creation is connected to the World of God through the link of the Manifestation. The Prophet, or Manifestation, is that Divine Being who is the Mouthpiece of the Unknown Essence we humans refer to as God.[50]

The purpose here is to simply mention this, not develop it. Such mentioning will enable us to appreciate how it is that the Bahá'í stance is so focused on "living the life," that is, embodiment, as the fruit of belief, in the same way the world is the fruit of the spirit.[51] Bahá'u'lláh does not present a coherent theory of metaphysics, nor does 'Abdu'l-Bahá; what They focus on more is the transformation of the heart, character and ultimately, society. This position, so rooted in the world as lived, acknowledges the interconnection of the spiritual world and the human world. Religion is even defined as "the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things."[52] Connections are relationships. 'Abdu'l-Bahá clearly states: "I swear by the true Teacher that if ye will act in accord with the admonitions of God, as revealed in His luminous Tablets, this darksome dust will mirror forth the Kingdom of heaven, and this nether world the realm of the All-Glorious."[53] Lest we think that this Kingdom of Heaven refers to a transcendental realm, beyond the reach of humanity, we are given to contemplate, as mentioned above that it "is within this world."[54] The mission of the Prophets is not to speak of

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[50] There are references in Bahá'í works to a five-fold hierarchical cosmological schema as found in Ishraqi thought. Some scholars think that the presence of this terminology affirms the cosmological views of the Islamic theosophers, while others assert that it is merely literary and customary usage, not an affirmation nor denial of such metaphysical speculations. The current writer views the issue according to the second viewpoint, and has explored this in his previous works.

[51] This view has a Zoroastrian heritage and was discussed in my work, *Re-Visioning, Re-Thinking, Re-Placing.*

[52] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *SAQ*, p. 158.

[53] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá,* pp. 11-12.

[54] ibid., p. 195.

abstract and transcendent spiritual realms, but to enable us to embody Their teachings and make of this Earth a spiritual world.

When we consider the fact of embodiment, I might be remiss to not mention one vital aspect of Chinese thought that we find re-expressed in Bahá'í philosophy. This vital link is that of correspondence between different aspects of existence. The current forces of postmodernism see a future beyond the current notions of fragmentation and alienation in existence, and for a connection with the whole. As an effective assistance, Bahá'í thought presents us with the dominance of ideas indicating correspondence and inter-relationship. We find in a talk of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's an expression of this relationship: "The worlds of God are in perfect harmony and correspondence one with another. Each world in this limitless universe is, as it were, a mirror reflecting the history and nature of all the rest. The physical universe is, likewise, in perfect correspondence with the spiritual or divine realm. The world of matter is an outer expression or facsimile of the inner kingdom of spirit. The world of minds corresponds with the world of hearts." [55] Likewise we read, "the material world corresponds to the spiritual world." The interconnection of various levels of existence is also addressed in many modern theories deriving from quantum mechanics and systems theory. We see this clearly explicated in the ecological spheres, and in Bahá'í philosophy we notice its extension to the cosmic. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that humanity should be thought of not as the "lesser world," but in fact as the "greater world." [56] The microcosm and macrocosm are in intimate relationship, as are humanity and the environmental surroundings.

The correlative thought that characterizes Chinese cosmology is well documented and expressed in literature. This mode of thinking began to arise in the fourth and third centuries BC and reached its height in the Former Han Dynasty of 200 BC to the first century AD. Benjamin

[55] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 270; see also *SAQ*, p. 283. It would be remiss of me to not note that this correlative view dominated in many pre-scientific systems of thought; this scientific thought referred to is *modern science*, not that which predated this system, and was developed in Europe. *Modern science* is particular to a western approach, and currently is the mathematico-deductive system that began with Galileo and Bacon. Be that as it may, the foundations of correlative thought, especially the "action at a distance" so popular within these systems, are still open to investigation and there are experiments that indicate such features are empirically verifiable.

[56] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 340.

Schwartz has termed this "correlative cosmology."[57] It is observed in the School of Yin and Yang and described clearly in the doctrine of the "Interrelation of Heaven and Man." "It is a kind of anthropocosmology in which entities, processes, and classes of phenomena found in nature correspond to or 'go together with' various entities, processes, and classes of phenomena in the human world."[58]

We note that in the works of Dong Zhongshu (Tung Chung Shu), a minor philosopher who lived from 179-104 BC, there is developed a doctrine which saw the universe as an organic whole, and man as a microcosm. With Nature the macrocosm and Humanity the microcosm, the dynamic interplay observable in Nature was reflected in Humanity. Tian / Heaven has its forces of yin and yang, the opposites of passive and active, etc., and Humanity likewise has its opposites of humanity, or benevolence (*ren*), and greed. As Tian can restrict the operations of these two forces, so can a person. From this, we are given to learn that Tian and Humanity operate in a similar manner. On the personal level, humanity was viewed to have inherent goodness, but potentially so. What was needed was education to discipline this nature. "The activity of Heaven extends to a certain point and then stops. What stops within the operation of Heaven is called human nature endowed by Heaven, and what stops outside the operation of Heaven is called human activity."[59] This dimension of human endeavor needs to be trained, thus the king and the sage are set up to provide the society in which these aspects can be cultivated. Dong Zhongshu even went so far as to make a correspondence with Tian and the physical body. We notice this also in Jewish and Islamic mystical speculations, with the human mind resembling the spiritual intelligence of heaven.

It would be interesting to pursue further this similarity, but space does not permit. It is telling that 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses this correlational pattern within a system that demands the harmony of science and religion. While Chinese philosophy derived this correlative thinking from the natural world and applied it to the spiritual or cosmic, the Bahá'í perspective is

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[57] Schwartz, B., op. cit., p. 350.
[58] ibid., p. 351.
[59] Wing-tsit Chan, op. cit., p. 275. This concept is reminiscent of a work by P. D. Ouspenski, *The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, in which he asserts a similar construct.

derived from the spiritual and is applied to the natural world. Perhaps there is a dimension to this correlative thinking that humanity has not yet fully explored and comprehended. The differences between these systems must be pursued before we can assert a strong similarity. While Chinese organismic thought is presented with existence and Nature as being self-generated, in Bahá'í thought there is a Creative Force that operates within the physical order, and there is a dimension of self-generation within this created order.

5. The Embodied Human

One fundamental hallmark of Western philosophy, at least as it pertains to living a life concerned with the spirit, is its ascetic nature. The philosophical heritage that the earth is a prison of the soul, that humanity "fell" from the heights of spirit, or from God's grace, to the mortal world deeply influenced Western philosophy.[60] Asceticism, monasticism, and various forms of self-renunciation became the way to salvation, the manner of ascent. The body was often looked upon as a burden to be gotten rid of and a hindrance to spirit. Emphasis was on spirit to the detriment of body. The lack of concern for the physical nature showed its impact on lack of concern for the body. Life was not about embodying spirit, it was about fleeing from the flesh. We witness the psychological counterbalance of this early tendency, beginning in the Renaissance and with humanism, with the dominating views of humanistic pleasure and materialistic empiricism. Asceticism often is counterposed by hedonism.

Chinese people have been characterized as being realistic in the sense of philosophy and life. Lin Yutang expresses this clearly in his work *The Importance of Living*. In one section where he is comparing Chinese and Western views of living he states,

> "This over-emphasis on the spirit was fatal. It made us war with our natural instincts and my chief criticism is that it made a whole rounded view of human nature impossible. It proceeded also from an inadequate knowledge of biology and psychology, and of the places of the senses, emotions and, above all, instincts in our life. Man is made

[60] For a thorough discussion of this concept, see Lovejoy, A., *The Great Chain of Being*.

> of flesh and spirit both, and it should be philosophy's business to see that the mind and body live harmoniously together, that there be a reconciliation between the two." [61]

Yutang's position is clearly correct. In part the lack of inclusive thinking was due to the abstract language used in Western philosophy, in part due to developmental stages of thought. (It is important to note, however, that in some aspects of Islamic philosophy, the body was viewed to be the temple of the spirit and one was to strive to embody the highest virtues of spirit.) This absence, of course, can be attributed to the stage of thought that was dominant at an earlier phase of human evolution, a stage that was not as integrative but tended towards differentiation of functions.

It is very apparent that this last position is similar to that found in Chinese thought. The Chinese thought regarding the threefold integration of Humanity, Earth and *Tian*, as well as the emphasis on becoming a *junzi* (君子), a noble person, is where we find means of establishing further dialogue. "For Confucius, the *junzi* is a qualitative term denoting someone who has an ongoing commitment to personal growth..,"[62] Further, "The *junzi* is what he says, and where he is exemplary, the world is as he speaks it....The Confucian model of personal realization does not permit distinctions between ethics and politics, between personal and social, between the private and public." [63] Through the terms *xin* (信), "living up to one's word,"—composed of the characters *ren* (人) "person" and *yan* (言) "to speak"—and *cheng* (诚), which means "sincerity" or "integrity," one strives to become *zhenren* (真人). Zhuangzi defines *zhen* as "the highest degree of purity and integrity."[64] *Zhenren* can also be defined as a genuine person, one whose words and deeds are integrated.

Speaking to a group in Paris, France, 'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke about the reality of the human. He stated that our reality is our thought, and that thought and action must be so wedded because "the power of a thought is dependent upon its manifestation in deeds," and He characterizes the

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[61] Yutang, L. *The Importance of Living*, p. 25.
[62] Hall, D. L., and Ames R. T. *Thinking form the Han: Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*, p. 160.
[63] ibid., p. 161.
[64] cited in ibid., p. 161, 163.

spiritual philosopher in these words: "His thought is himself."[65] In another context, the Guardian of the Faith, Shoghi Effendi states emphatically that:

> "One thing and only one thing will unfailingly and alone secure the undoubted triumph of this sacred Cause, namely, the extent to which our own inner life and private character mirror forth in their manifold aspects the splendor of those eternal principles proclaimed by Baha'u'llah."[66]

If we do not know the history of such a profound thought, this presents us with a challenge that shakes our foundations and demands action. Here we find words spoken that resonate with the deepest components of being. We find in the Chinese civilization an injunction so similar that it is uncanny. In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the *Zhongyong*, we read:

> "What Heaven has endowed is called the nature. Following the nature is called the Way. Cultivating the Way is called instruction. The Way cannot be departed from for so much as an instant. If it were possible to depart from it, it would not be the Way. Therefore the noble person is cautious and watchful about what is unseen and fearful and apprehensive about what is unheard. There is nothing more visible than what is hidden, nothing more apparent than what is minute. Therefore the noble person is watchful over himself while alone." [67]

Another version reads a bit differently in translation and focuses our thought more coherently. The beginning sentences are the same:

> "One cannot depart from his way for an instant, what can be departed is not a way. A man of moral integrity is always discreet and vigilant when he is beyond others' sight, apprehensive and cautious when beyond others' hearing. One should never misbehave even when he is in privacy, nor should he reveal evil intentions even in trivial matters. So a moral person remains circumspect especially when he is alone."[68]

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[65] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 18.
[66] Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 66.
[67] *The Doctrine of the Mean*, trans. by W. DeBary, op. cit., p. 334.
[68] *The Doctrine of the Mean*, trans. He Baihua.

Furthermore, the "unity of knowledge and action," a long and pivotal idea of Confucianism, reached its pinnacle expression in Wang Yang-Ming's dynamic idealism (1472-1529). To Yang-Ming, sincerity of will must precede the investigation of things, and "knowledge is the beginning of action and action the completion of knowledge."[69] For the one who knows, the two are integrated; one who is not integrated does not know.

It is important to keep in mind the passage from Bahá'u'lláh cited in the opening of this article, that this Revelation presents "for the purpose of ennobling the world of being and of elevating the minds and souls of men" that which is the most perfect expression of such a process. Therefore it should come as no surprise that we find such similarity. The education of the whole human race is what has been undertaken. The Chinese civilization and its sages and philosophers strove to embody virtues that would maintain the balance between the cosmos and humanity, between Heaven and Earth. This relationship was central to their understanding. That it should find its restatement in this new Revelation is not surprising. Chinese civilization attained great heights and great insights. A dialogue with Western and a developing Bahá'í civilization offers great potential.

6. World Civilization

We have already looked at the areas for future dialogue regarding the cosmic, or heavenly, aspect, and the human component. If we discuss a bit about the earthly component, we will have completed the traditional trilogy found in Chinese civilization. Indeed, the thrust of Chinese philosophical thought, as well as Bahá'í religious thought, is transformation of the world and civilization. The interconnection of the earth, the environment and society is so integrated that Shoghi Effendi was prompted to remark:

> "We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the

[69] Wing-tsit Chan, op. cit., p. 656.

> other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions."[70]

If we look on the dimension of this passage regarding the oneness of humanity with the world, but focus on the human element, we do so with the background of how this harmony of humanity will eventuate the rebalance of the world's equilibrium.

It has already been mentioned that one of the central principles of the Bahá'í Faith is the attainment of the stage initiating the maturity of the human race. Fused with this position is another essential principle: the oneness of the world of humanity. This thought, part and parcel of our daily dialogues now, was unique when it was spoken in the 19th century. Yet its roots were so deeply gripped into the human psyche and heart that when it was broached it heralded new opportunities, transitions and potentials.

Bahá'u'lláh spoke emphatically about the oneness of mankind, the fact that we all live on one planet, are nourished by one interconnected ecological system, and created by one Creative Source. When he was a prisoner of the dynasties in Iran, Iraq and Turkey, from 1852-1892, he loudly proclaimed this call at a time when industrialist, separatist and nationalist tendencies were on the rise. Race, nationality, creed or religion cannot sever this fundamental unity. He has made it the central feature of the religion established in his Name: "We, verily, have come to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth."[71] This vital principle ushers us into a new level of consciousness, one that is more and more permeating the entire planet and its peoples.

This principle is so vital to Bahá'u'lláh's claim that Shoghi Effendi elaborated upon it in great detail in his writings. Among them we find this:

> "Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Baha'u'llah revolve—is no

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[70] Shoghi Effendi, found in "Conservation of the Earth's Resources", compiled by the Research Dept. of the Universal House of Justice, Oct. 1989, cited in *The Compilation of Compilations,* p. 84.

[71] Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf,* p. 24.

mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced. It constitutes a challenge, at once bold and universal, to outworn shibboleths of national creeds—creeds that have had their day and which must, in the ordinary course of events as shaped and controlled by Providence, give way to a new gospel, fundamentally different from, and infinitely superior to, what the world has already conceived. It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units. It represents the consummation of human evolution—an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in the achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Baha'u'llah, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it." [72]

This passage was cited in full because it proffers to us one of the clearest insights into the audacious assertion of the Bahá'í Faith. Yes, this claim is

[72] Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 42-43.

very bold, blatant and demands attention. It is fit for an extensive dialogue, with serious implications.

It is also very clear that modern Chinese civilization and government is working along these lines, striving to maintain peaceful relations with other nations and build a system of inter-relationship that has heretofore eluded it and the rest of humanity. This should not surprise us, either.

Embedded in the history of Chinese civilization, within the foundations of Confucian thought, is the essential feature of filial piety. Honoring of one's parents is vital to the maintenance of civilization and thus the world. Confucianism felt that this one area, the continuation of family ties and the honoring of parents, was what made Taoist thought incomplete. The isolationist practices, the aversion for social organizations could not, the Confucianists maintained, honor filiality. The Confucian school could not integrate filial piety with living in isolation from society. This doctrine is the center piece of the *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸) as well as *The Great Learning* (大学) and of course the *Classic of Filial Piety* (*Xiaojing:* 孝敬). A Chinese Confucian scholar of the early 20th century commented thusly on the implications of filial piety:

> "The family group underlies the whole fabric of society. Each smaller group is gathered up into a larger group, so that all trace their relationship to the prime ancestor....Therefore Tso Chuan says, 'The way of men is to love one's relatives. Because of love for relatives, ancestors are honored; honor for ancestors brings respect for distant relatives; respect for distant relatives brings a sense of kinship.' This family concept constitutes the fundamental basis of political organization. When this conception is further strengthened by religious ideals, its effect is the more vigorous....The logical result of such concepts is the recognition that all mankind is but one large family."[73]

The roots go deep, indeed. In fact we find in the *Book of Poetry*, from a time before the *Lunyu* (*Analects*) the foundation of this idea. In the *Book of Filial Piety* we read:

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[73] Liang Ch'i'ch'ao *History of Chinese Political Thought*, cited in Jingpan, C., *Confucius as a Teacher*, pp. 284-285.

> "Filial piety is the root of virtue and the origin of culture....To establish oneself and walk according to the right Way (*Tao*), in order to glorify one's parents: this is the culmination of filial piety. Filial piety begins with serving one's parents, leads to serving one's king, and ends in establishing oneself..."[74]

If this were not enough to establish a foundation of dialogue with a developing Bahá'í civilization, a brief mention of the Chinese word for religion, *jiao* (教), which is derived from the character for filial piety, *xiao* (孝), plus a causative radical, will enable us to see more. So, the word for religion, *jiao*, means to make filial in a deeper sense.

The publication *China Critic* writes:

> "Filial piety is the alpha and omega of his [Confucius'] ethics. It includes and logically presupposes every other virtue under heaven. Thus, honesty, justice, courage, self-control, modesty and loyalty, all come under the single rubric of devotion to parents."[75]

Likewise, we find in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*, the *Most Holy Book* of Bahá'u'lláh, these words:

> "The fruits that best befit the tree of human life are trustworthiness and godliness, truthfulness and sincerity; but greater than all, after recognition of the unity of God, praised and glorified be He, is regard for the rights that are due to one's parents." [76]

The foundation of society is rooted in the family; the pivot of the Bahá'í Faith is in the recognition of this essential oneness which is dependent upon harmony within the family and with one's parents. Second to the recognition of the 'unity of God' is that of giving due regard for parents, a very central obligation, indeed.

To conclude this section, we must address the component of physical Earth. It is very apparent that in Chinese civilization, the interconnection

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[74] cited in ibid., p. 276.
[75] cited in ibid., p. 278.
[76] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 139.

between humanity and Earth, between morality and environment, was centrally recognized. In the concept of the "Mandate of Heaven" ("*Tian Ming*"), ancient Chinese thought realized how vital it was for the kings and people to live lives of morality and harmony. When the empires failed in this compulsion, when a dynasty became morally lax and carnal pleasures dominated, the Mandate determined that it was to be overthrown. This was used, of course, for political legitimacy, but the harmony and potential dialogue with Bahá'í thought is very apparent. Humanity is organic with the world, and morality and godliness impact the environment in direct ways that we have not yet discerned clearly. When peace prevails in the world, when expenditures for armaments and weapons of destruction are diverted into revitalizing societies and assisting the peoples of the world, a new consciousness and manner of being will embrace the world. Tensions that now exist between groups and nations will, in the flowering of time, pass away and the long awaited peace and harmony will prevail. This is the assertion of all ancient thoughts, and the claim of the Bahá'í religion.

7. Prospects for Future Dialogues

In this brief presentation, we have considered how the Chinese civilization and the nascent Bahá'í civilization can establish a dialogue around various areas of common concern. We have clearly seen similarities between ideas from Chinese philosophy and Bahá'í teachings that enable us to deepen this dialogue and pursue the transitions and potentialities inherent within the human reality and social structures of civilization. We have reflected upon the cosmic or heavenly component, as well as the human and earthly components of dialogical possibilities. While this article focused more on the Confucian school, some of the views are applicable to the Taoist and Buddhist views. It remains for further investigation, however, to explore a deeper analysis of these three thought systems as they pertain to Chinese civilization as a composite entity, and to the nascent Bahá'í civilization. For analysis, these three Chinese systems can be separated, as long as we realize that by so doing we are considering the parts. The intermingling of these three philosophies provided fertile ground for much exchange and influence of ideas. In fact, it is clear that

the influence of Buddhism prompted the Neo-Confucians to begin more metaphysical extrapolations.[77]

While we have examined briefly the roots of Chinese as well as Western thought, we must not forget that present civilizations are built upon these roots. The various changes that philosophers of each culture have introduced, the fine tuning of ideas; all have their roots in these foundations. While the civilizations that we inhabit today differ markedly from these roots, the roots go deep. We are witnessing such change, technological, economic, political and religious, that mandates we search our roots to find what is valuable and enduring. From these, then, we must prune that which has become dead and contributes to separation, and foster those that nurture integration. The "third wave" of Confucian scholars, using modern academic, philosophical, and hermeneutic techniques, are beginning to examine the viability of Confucian thought for contemporary society.

When one examines the Bahá'í Writings, the historical and psychological roots that are presented and the ideas that are brought forth, clothed in a new manner, may enable us to attain what was a vague and distant vision in these older philosophies and civilizations. World unity has demands that differ greatly from feudal or national unity. Again, in the Bahá'í system, it takes a Divine Power to transform on a global scale and implement new patterns of living.

There is need to express here what has so far been unexpressed. We find in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's thought a number of statements that warrant attention as scholars begin to look closer at Chinese philosophical thought. Presented here are two of these passages that impinge upon our awareness:

> "In short, all sections and parties have their aspirations realized in the teachings of Baha'u'llah. As these teachings are declared in churches, in mosques and in other places of worship, whether those of the followers of Buddha or of Confucius, in political circles or amongst materialists, all shall bear witness that these teachings bestow a fresh

[77] For a succinct overview of Buddhism in China, see deBary, op. cit.

life upon mankind and constitute the immediate remedy for all the ills of social life." [78]

"Confucius became the cause of civilization, advancement and prosperity for the people of China. Now it is not the time when we discuss concerning the stations and positions of those who are passed away. We must concentrate our attention upon the present. What hath transpired in a former time is past. Now is the time when we restrict our discussion to the Most Great Luminary of Peace and Salvation in this Age, to talk of the Blessed Perfection [Bahá'u'lláh] and to voice His exhortations, behests and teachings." [79]

It seems that in these two selections we are given a manner of approaching further dialogue. It is tempting to merely seek similarity of concepts in religious and philosophical thoughts, especially as they pertain to one dominant feature of Chinese and Bahá'í positions: embodiment. So far much of the Bahá'í-Chinese dialogue has striven to highlight points of commonality. This is always a healthy and necessary way to enter any long term relationship. Within the context of this article, this is the approach taken, while at the same time setting out some dissimilar points.

I propose that the two passages above imply for us an approach that is warranted and will contribute to further dialogue. This stance is one of beginning to draw out the differences, while continuing to look at the commonalities. In the second passage we are given a position to focus "our attention upon the present." In another work, we read, "Sciences of former ages and philosophies of the past are useless today. Present exigencies demand new methods of solution; world problems are without precedent. Old ideas and modes of thought are fast becoming obsolete."[80] If we seek only common points, perhaps we will overlook the discontinuities that are embedded within Bahá'í thought. We need to explore more what old ideas and thoughts are obsolete, while mining those that are enduring. And here there subsists an echo of Kongzi's

[78] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to August Forel*, pp. 26-27
[79] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas*, vol. 2, pp. 469-70
[80] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation*, p. 140

personal position and practice, "A man who reviews the old so as to find out the new is qualified to teach others." [81]

While we must seek common ground, we need to not seek *only* for this. I am here reminded of the Jesuit entrance to China under the personage of Mateo Ricci, who, from 1583 until his death in 1610, taught the Jesuit understanding of Christianity. In so doing, he adopted Chinese clothing, language, customs and terminology. By so doing, he not only taught the Chinese, he also, so some historians assert, failed to differentiate the Christian faith enough from Confucianism, so that many were left wondering what he offered that Kongzi did not. One such historian writes about it this way:

> "One Christian assumption, then, has been that any particular cultural wrapping can cover the core of universal truth. Yet, this assumption, which should have precluded any Chinese emotional need to balk at Christian foreignness, was but a net to catch the wind. It was meant to persuade a Chinese that the truth belonged to everyone, but the assumption could simply confirm the Chinese in his predisposition to see truth in what belonged to him. Thus, the early Jesuits in China, in their fear, for their religion, of its fatal indictment as a western, passing thing, hopefully expressed it as a sort of 'perennial philosophy.' Its truths were supposed to be evident even in the Chinese Classics, if the Chinese would only look. Revelation, the emphasis on what is *sui generis* to the religion, was deliberately shadowed in mysticism, in the insistence that truth is free of temporal, historical context. And this tactic, though born of a sound instinct that some sort of tactic was necessary, was self-defeating..." [82]

Of course with the new trends in Chinese thought and culture, there is no concern of *not* demonstrating the foreignness of the Bahá'í religion while likewise showing its universality. The trend towards anything foreign makes this faith and social context different. The differences that exist between Bahá'í and Chinese thought have been little explored yet, in part because the dialogue is so new. The cultural openness in modern China provides many more different opportunities than Ricci or others had.

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[81] *Analects* 2:11, trans. Chan, Wing-tsit, *Sourcebook*, op. cit., p. 23.
[82] Levenson, J. *Confucian China and Its Modern Fate: A Trilogy*, pp. 118-119.

However, the other dramatic changes, more essential than the openness to new ideas, warrant our attention as well.

It is well known that the failures of Maoist communism, acknowledged at the highest governmental levels, has left a vacuum in Chinese spirituality. More than this, it has bred a distrust of any utopian idealism; religion, as historically presented, offers utopian ideals: universal brotherhood, universal peace, collective security, the well-being of all humankind, etc. It seems that if a Bahá'í-Chinese dialogue does not seriously contemplate this element, this leeriness of any doctrine that sounds utopian, the dialogue may not penetrate to the core of the debate.[83] If it is true, as Jiwei Ci expresses, that Confucianism provided a code of conduct and a code of virtues to support it, but did not have a code of belief, it is this last aspect that many are seeking to find.[84] This is what the belief in communism purported to offer and could not. It offered the possibility of a utopian ideal that failed to materialize, and that left a nation searching for meaning. However, the adage of "once bitten, twice shy" may apply to the current Chinese situation. The thrust of much current Chinese scholarship focuses on the religious dimension of Confucianism and Taoism, and while this is surely valid in the sense used, it differs

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[83] While the recent incidents involving the Falun Gong Movement, labeled as a cult by the Central Government, and widely discussed in the media of the West and East, may indicate a continued repression and control of religious freedom in China, especially of an organization that can easily mobilize millions of people, I assume the reasons are more complicated. While it may be valid that any perceived threat to Party control is curtailed for political reasons, to assert that this is the only reason in the case of Falun Gong is simplistic. Freedom of expression needs limits, as the prevalence of anarchistic tendencies in many western democracies blatantly indicate. It is a delicate balance, especially when a transition is being made from feudalism-communism to a socialist-capitalist market economy in a country of 1.3 billion people! The psychological reasons for the success of the cult are clear to one who has investigated it. A question looms here: because the western countries, America in particular, allow the rise and flourishing of cult movements, and then the mass suicides that occur because of this "freedom," does this prove that such is the best way to handle such movements? Are there logical and reasonable limits to freedom that must be seriously addressed in incidents like this? Indeed, we notice in both Chinese and Bahá'í positions the great virtue of the "middle way" between extremes. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá express cogently that freedom needs limits. 'Abdu'l-Bahá espouses freedom, but it is one that is "moderate."

[84] See footnote #7. It is also valid that the Confucian Dong Zhongshu elevated the Confucian notion of *Tian* to a transcendent principle, but this never became the dominating concept in Confucianism at the time.

markedly from a religion based on revelation.[85] It is well documented that many of the religious documents in the Taoist canon are considered to be outright plagiarism of Buddhist texts.[86] Likewise it is significant to note that deBary and Bloom's work refers, in the chapter titled "Daoist Religion," to the "Shangqing and Lingbao revelations,"[87] but more research needs to be undertaken to discern the implications and usage of this term in its historical and contemporary contexts.

Added to these are the suspicions that arise when one dialogues about "religion" or "revelation" from God. The dominant education in Marxist ideology gives the common people different ideas about a Deity and religious systems, and presents a challenge when confronting those faiths that exist there. It would be unwise, it seems to my limited understanding, to not acknowledge fully that belief in a Deity that governs and controls, that has created and sustains physical existence, is not a widely held conception in modern China, though we may find traces of it in the syncretism of folk religion. There are many contemporary scholars, Chinese and Western, who are taking great pains to argue that it has *never* been part of Chinese thought; that Chinese humanistic religion is founded upon human ingenuity and understanding, not divine revelation as espoused in Bahá'í thought. Are the two systems reconcilable? In fact, can humanistic religion be justifiably considered a belief system? And if so, then we need to clarify in what ways it is, and how it differs from a revealed religious system. The "grounds" of belief differ significantly. There are many issues herein that are worthy of dialogue.

One voice that provides current discussion in this dialogue is Kow Mei Kao. His previous article in the pages of this journal, "Chinese Religions: Evolution, Compatibility and Adaptability," provide us with an alternative view to Ci's.[88] Kow expresses the presence of a belief system that characterizes Confucianism in the Han period. He asserts that it presented

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[85] In a previous article, I argued that the notion of religion that may be dominant may need to be reconsidered in light of the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith's views of religion being the "necessary relations that emanate from the reality of all things" rather than *just* a doctrine. This is true. However, we must integrate it with the fact of revelation as source of religion. See my article, "Heaven in China without 'Religion' and Manifestation."

[86] For a good presentation of this fact, see, e.g., Liu Ts'un-Yan, *Selected Papers from the Hall of Harmonious Wind*.

[87] op. cit., *Sources of Chinese Tradition*, p. 393.

[88] *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, 2000, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 63-85.

a belief in Heaven with a personal god; a belief that mankind is the noblest creature composed of the trinity of Heaven, Earth and humanity; belief in the rewards or punishments in afterlife; belief that good deeds done in this life accumulate favors from Heaven unto the earth in the portends of nature; and belief in astrological forecasting.[89] This presents an interesting thesis, and one worthy of investigation. However, it might indicate, as Kow himself proposes, that it represents the Han period of Confucian ideology and not an enduring feature, as Ci's stance seems to indicate.

We cannot dialogue with the past, with texts of an ancient civilization, divorced from people who express them or their applicability to contemporary society. While the Chinese government openly discusses "socialist spiritual civilization,"[90] the understanding of such a term greatly differs, from in the minds of the common people, to those at higher levels, as well as from its historical referent. This should be openly acknowledged. A dialogue about what "spiritual" means, both within current and historical Chinese contexts, as well as the Bahá'í stance, implies clarity about these matters. Words used differently provide substantially different meanings; the terms used need to be clarified so that dialogue may proceed smoothly, and each party grasp the meanings as used.

A saying attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates to us that the Bahá'í who wants to teach the Chinese should, among other things, "know their sacred literature, study their customs, and speak to them from their own standpoint and using their own terminologies."[91] While this is an attributed saying rather than a quotation, it does us well to contemplate it deeply.

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[89] ibid., p. 66.

[90] This term is commonly used in current Chinese thought, and can be found in President Zhu Rongji's report submitted to the National People's Congress on the Outline of the Tenth Five Year Plan for National Economic and Social development (2001-2005).

[91] This passage is found in many places. It is noteworthy that in the book about Martha Root, *Lioness at the Threshold*, by M. Garis, p. 510, we find a footnote to this passage. The note (#1) reads: "Since neither documentation nor an approved translation exists for this passage, it cannot be considered authentic and must be regarded as 'pilgrim's notes.'—Ed." This traditional saying, in fact, perhaps the development of a Bahá'í hadith, reflects the spirit needed for those of us engaged in Bahá'í-Chinese dialogue.

To know the Chinese sacred literature implies a knowledge (deep or cursory depending upon the individual propensities) of: *The I Ching* (易经: *Book of Changes*), *Daxue* (大学: *Great Learning*), *Zhongyong* (中庸: *Doctrine of the Mean*), *Zhuangzi* (庄子), *Tao de Jing* (道德经), *Lunyu* (论语: *Analects*), and other works from the Taoist and Buddhist canons. To speak "from their own standpoint" implies that we know their *current* standpoint, not merely the historical one that many are only vaguely familiar with. It is vital, it seems to me, for one who would be a teacher or scholar to grasp deeply the historical views and the development of Chinese thought, so that s/he may relate an understanding of terminologies that are now unused but lie at the roots of Chinese consciousness. To show contemporary Chinese the beauty that resides in the depth of their civilization's sacred and philosophical roots is a sacred undertaking. These roots are widely unknown but often referred to. Many of my students know, when it is drawn on a blackboard, or seen on a sign, what the sign of the Yin-yang (阴阳) or the *bagua* (八卦) is, but have only the most vague idea what it means and its import for their culture.[92] This is a great service, it seems, to dialogue about and to connect with the roots again.

Finally, to "use their own terminology" seems to imply that when we speak of the Tao, or *Tian*, *ren*, or any other term, we know what it means historically, in its many guises, and currently. Phyllis Chew's work, *The Chinese Religion and the Bahá'í Faith*, provides some preliminary insights into these terms and their similarities with Bahá'í thought. To pursue and deepen this is now the task in providing for a fuller dialogue.

Considered from a different angle, and from much personal experience, to be able to cogently and intelligently discuss the assertion of "the harmony of science and religion" implies to "use their own terminology" as well. "Their" education and terminology is steeped in scientism, and to know this, to respond to these features, recognizes their validity. To be able to articulate in a scientific manner—that is systematically, clearly and with strong logical evidence in support—enables many contemporary Chinese

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[92] For those readers who are unfamiliar with this, it is the traditional circular figure half white, half black with a fluid (not straight) line between the halves (looks like a large S), and the black side contains a small white circle in it and the white side a small black circle, see p. 10 of this journal.

to value their learning in science, and to integrate it with a system of belief that supports it. We need, however, to clarify that this harmony spoken of does not mean harmony with any *assertion* of science, but with its principles, system of pursuing truth, and reasonableness. Modern science is only one dimension of science. We must make a distinction between the *spirit* of science and the scientistic, that is materialistic, views that dominate it today. Discussion on this component holds much potential as well.

It also seems prudent to mention herein the establishment in 1999 of the Center of Bahá'í Studies (CBS) in association with the Pacific Rim Institute for Development and Education (PRIDE), and The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), Institute of World Religions, in Beijing. This Center holds great potential for dialogue as well.

Further dialogue about Chinese and Bahá'í views of civilization will need to focus upon these issues as well as upon the ethical, moral and psychological implications of each culture as discussed in their sacred texts. It will need, moreover, to be integrated with the scientific world view that is demanded in the Bahá'í civilization being built. Much of Chinese philosophy has been termed pre-scientific; it has even been termed as non-philosophical compared to Western philosophy. However, what is vital to grasp is that Western philosophy has been more cognitively oriented, grappling with abstract ideas. Chinese philosophy, on the other hand, has been described as more orientative, that is oriented to the transformation of the individual and thus society. [93] This is the purpose of true philosophy and religion, and the purpose of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

As we glance around us at the world at large, at societies and civilizations, at individuals and families, we observe the upheavals of great convulsions. The establishment of a spiritual civilization is not an easy task, and only the power born of God, working through humanity in the world, is capable of effectuating it; this is the claim of the Bahá'í Faith. We can only do our small, albeit significant, part to make others aware. In so doing, when the dialogue with the Chinese civilization is deepened, we will observe ideas that may revolutionize the understanding that many

[93] For a discussion of this distinction see, Cheng, C., op. cit.

westerners have of it. Likewise, it is proposed that as the dialogue progresses, so too, will humanity's understanding of the Bahá'í Faith's contribution to civilization. It is without doubt an exciting venture to be able to help establish some parameters for a dialogue with a civilization as ancient as the Chinese and as burgeoning as that envisioned in the Bahá'í Faith as delineated by Bahá'u'lláh, and his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "the Architect of His World Order." [94]

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[94] Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 245.

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Rationality in Academic Disciplines

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Abstract

Following Fleck and Kuhn, the academia in the twenty first century have come to recognize the value of acknowledging and understanding the diversity of "epistemic cultures", that is, the thought styles of communities engaged in the production of knowledge. For an academic community to construct public knowledge through teamwork, there are two important pre-requisites. First, the members of the community must have a shared language that presupposes approximately the same pairings of concepts and words. Second, they must have a shared epistemic value system on the basis of which they make collective decisions on what is credible and what is not, and choose between competing candidates for excellence in knowledge. A subset of such criteria for critical thinking also allows us to engage in rational argumentation within the community.

If we define "dialogue" as a two-way conversation between two parties, it follows that contemporaneity is a necessary condition for all dialogue: we cannot have any dialogue with ancient cultures or civilizations of the past. If dialogue involves rational argumentation across epistemic cultures, it is equally important that their epistemic value systems have a set of shared commitments as well. In my paper, I will make an attempt to outline such a shared set of commitments that provide the basis for dialogue across academic cultures, ranging from history and philosophy to biology and physics, and various sub-communities within a discipline.

1. Unity in the Diversity of Academic Inquiry

The word *rational* means "agreeable to reason," or "reasonable," and *irrational* means "contrary to reason" or "unreasonable." Rational inquiry would therefore be inquiry that is founded on a commitment to the value

of reason.

Now, what appears reasonable to one person or community may not appear reasonable to another. As a result, what is judged to be highly credible or of high quality by one individual may be judged to be not credible or of poor quality by another. In many instances, disagreements on what is reasonable and what is credible arise from differences in the prior knowledge and value systems that we tend to take for granted.

Any evaluation of quality in any domain involves a set of commitments to a value system on the basis of which we perform the evaluation. When we judge a person to be more beautiful or graceful than another, an action to be morally good or bad, a pumpkin pie to be the most delicious we have had, a person to be a better tennis player than another, or a teacher to be outstanding, we draw upon an implicit or explicit system of *criteria for evaluation*. The pursuit of academic excellence is not different from these activities in that academic judgments also involve a set of commitments to what constitutes good or reliable academic knowledge, on the basis of which we judge academic work to be poor, good, or excellent. Every time academics grade a student essay, evaluate a doctoral thesis, argue with one another on the relative merits of competing theories, or think through a research problem, they draw upon an academic value system.

In a number of domains, the criteria upon which our evaluation is based vary across individuals, causing their judgments to diverge. Thus, the garlic pickle that one person judges to be the tastiest in the world may be judged as foul tasting by another for whom garlic is unpleasant. Likewise, disagreements on the relative beauty or grace of two models may not be resolvable because one person may be attracted by the sultry looks that another person reacts negatively to. The situation is no different in academic work. A research paper judged to be excellent by one journal reviewer may be judged to be unpublishable by another, and a student essay that receives a C from one professor may receive an A+ from another.

In spite of these individual differences, the value systems of the members of a community have a set of shared characteristics, and most individuals in a community imbibe and conform to this socially shared system of values. Hence, we find relative uniformity within a culture, but variability

across cultures. Plump women used to be regarded as beautiful in Western cultures during a certain period, and they still are in some current cultures, but are surely not so in modern western cultures. This is a general pattern that cuts across individuals in a given culture. Likewise, premarital sex is judged to be immoral in some communities but morally neutral in others. A singer unanimously judged to be the best in the community of South Indian classical music may sound harsh to the European ear. Likewise, a theoretical framework that is judged to be a major breakthrough in some academic circles may be judged to be mediocre in others.

Differences in academic value systems constitute one of the central components of the differences that come under the rubric of paradigms or "discourses". That scientific research is predicated on a set of largely implicit axiomatic commitments was probably first pointed out in 1935 by Ludwik Fleck in *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*. Fleck referred to these commitments as thought-styles. His insight was popularized by Kuhn in 1962 in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* which raised the problem of incommensurability across scientific communities with different value systems and different terminologies. Kuhn used the term "paradigm" instead of "thought-style" to refer to the commitments that drive scientific research. The notion of paradigms has been subsequently generalized to academic work in general, and has given rise to research on the epistemic cultures of academics. In the post-modern language, the epistemological differences among academic communities have come to be designated as alternative "discourses" of different "epistemic cultures."

Now, despite the obvious differences across cultures, there are also certain broad characteristics that are shared by the value systems of different communities, and properties that are repeatedly found in cultures across space and time. Thus, even though some cultures approve female genital mutilation and others consider it barbarous, all human cultures seem to agree that causing suffering and death to fellow humans intentionally and without a compelling moral justification is morally bad. Likewise, qualities like compassion, love, generosity, courage, self-lessness, and truthfulness are typically regarded as morally desirable across human cultures, while qualities like cruelty, hatred, greed, selfishness, cowardice, conceit, deceit, and dishonesty are regarded as morally undesirable. Similar patterns emerge in the judgments of beauty as well. In spite of

individual and cultural differences in what is regarded as beautiful, there are certain broad tendencies that are shared across individuals and cultures such that given extreme cases, even individuals with widely divergent cultural backgrounds agree on which of two people compared is more beautiful than the other.

The common values shared across cultures in ethics and aesthetics point to the possibility of similar cross-cultural patterns in academic values as well. Now, it is fairly obvious that divergences in academic value systems can lead to extremely frustrating situations in academic interactions, and hinder productive collaborations. In debates on beauty, we can agree to disagree and hold on to our personal judgments, and disagreements between judges in beauty contests can be resolved through some form of voting. Most academics would agree that this solution cannot be extended to the problem of academic quality, where quality is not a matter of popularity. A solution to this problem would be for each of us to articulate as explicitly as possible our commitments in academic inquiry, then to identify those commitments shared across individuals or communities, and resolve our differences through negotiation on the basis of the shared commitments.

One way of exploring the value system shared across academic communities ranging from physics to philosophy would be to assume that academic inquiry is a form of rational inquiry, and look for the general characteristics of rational inquiry in a wide spectrum of academic disciplines. In other words, in order to facilitate conversation and healthy debate across epistemic cultures (research paradigms, alternative discourses), it is crucial that we understand our own commitments and see what we have in common with others.

What follows is an initial attempt to identify these shared commitments to facilitate conversations across academic cultures. We may think of it as a manifesto of rational inquiry, the axioms of which are fairly obvious to any academic. I doubt very much if practicing academics would disagree on the desirability of these postulates in principle, but once explicitly formulated we can see that many research programmes do not actually practice what they might agree to in principle.

2. Foundations of Rational Inquiry

Consistency and coherence

The foundational principle of rationality is the prohibition of logical contradictions, explicitly formulated by Greek philosopher Aristotle. We cannot simultaneously believe that the earth is flat and the earth is not flat, or that Zeno broke the jar and Zeno didn't break the jar. Believing in such contradictory statements would amount to irrationality. The prohibition against logical inconsistency (mutual contradiction) may be explicitly stated as:

A. *Logical Consistency:* The totality of statements that we believe to be true (what we regard as knowledge) must not contain logical contradictions.

The prohibition of logical inconsistency is a first step towards rationality. If we give up (A), we cannot engage in rational argumentation, as it is the foundation of rational inquiry in every discipline, ranging from mathematics and physics to history and literary theory.

Related to logical consistency is the somewhat elusive intuition of coherence that is not easy to articulate explicitly except as the property of cohering, i.e., sticking together in a unified manner. Coherence involves connectedness, both conceptual and logical. Compare, for instance the list under (i) with that in (ii):

(i) Gravity, Force, Acceleration, Velocity, Time, Space
(ii) Gravity, Feminism, AIDS, Calculus, Trillion, Schizophrenia

The list in (i) forms a set of conceptually connected items, while that in (ii) is a random set. To take another example, consider paragraph (iii) with that in (iv):

(iii) All gleeps are dovines. All dovines have six legs. Blimpsey is a glump. All glumps have one leg less than a gleep.

(iv) All gleeps are dovines. All gleeps have six legs. Blimpsey is a glunk. All glunks have one leg less than a dovine.

The statements in (iii) are logically connected. By putting them together, we can deduce the consequence that Blimpsey has five legs. In contrast, the statements in (iv) do not form a coherent set.

We will have more to say about coherence later, but for now we can state an important criterion on rational knowledge as follows:

B. *Coherence*: The totality of statements that we believe to be true must be maximally coherent, i.e., must fit together in the best possible way.

While (A) makes an absolute prohibition of logical inconsistency, (B) calls for the maximization of coherence.

For a set of statements to be coherent, they should be free from logical inconsistency, but mere logical consistency is not sufficient for coherence: a random set of unrelated entities which have nothing to do with one another may still be free from logical inconsistency. Hence, even though coherence is a pre-requisite for consistency, the two requirements are not the same.

Justification

Another fundamental requirement of rational inquiry is that of justification, stated as C:

C. *Justification:* The statements that we believe or claim to be true must be justified on basis of appropriate grounds and/or reasoning.

In mathematics, a theorem is justified by demonstrating that it follows from the axioms of the theory. Thus, theorems are justified on the basis of pure reasoning. In physics, a theory is justified by demonstrating that it provides the best explanation for a range of puzzling observations. In ethical philosophy, a conclusion is justified by demonstrating that it follows from our fundamental ethical commitments. An analysis of a poem is justified by showing that it provides an insightful interpretation of the poem that fits with our response to the poem.

As in the case of (A) and (B), criterion (C) is also part of all modes of academic inquiry. What constitute appropriate grounds may not be identical in all disciplines, but the commitment to justification cuts across all forms of rational inquiry.

3. Statements about the world

Fit with experience

As stated above, knowledge claims in the formal sciences of mathematics and logic are justified by showing that they follow from the axioms of the theory. Whether the axioms are true or not is irrelevant. Depending upon which axioms we assume, we get different results. Likewise, ethical judgments are justified on the basis of the ethical axioms that we are committed to. Why is it morally undesirable to kill kittens? Because we are committed to the moral axiom that it is immoral to cause death or suffering to living creatures, and killing kittens is causing death. This justification is not valid if we do not subscribe to the prohibition against causing death and suffering to living creatures.

This state of affairs does not hold for disciplines like history, anthropology, literary criticism, psychology, geography, biology, and physics, where knowledge claims are justified by showing that they fit with our experience of the world. By "experience" we refer to a wide spectrum of input ranging from sensory experience (length), non-sensory experience (pain), data, text, documents, sources, measurements, witness testimonies, and so on. Such statements include theories, frameworks, models, analyses/interpretations, generalizations/correlations, and singular statements. Some of the statements of substantive knowledge are statements of direct experience (e.g., My brother is taller than my sister; there were tears in my aunt's eyes yesterday; there was a flash of lightning two hours ago, followed by a peal of thunder) while others are conclusions drawn from experience (e.g., Men are taller than women; my aunt was sad yesterday; lightning and thunder are caused by the flow of electricity from rain clouds).

We may state as follows a condition on statements about the world:

D. *Fit with experience:* Statements that we believe to be true of the world must fit with our experience of the world.

Given (D) it follows that our experience of the world forms the grounds for the justification of what we believe to be true about the world. We can therefore formulate a more specific version of the condition on justification in (C) to hold on statements about the world. In this version, (C'), the appropriate grounds and reasoning are our experience of the world:

C'. *Justification:* The statements that we believe or claim to be true about the world must be justified on the basis of our experience of the world, together with reasoning where necessary.

Testimonies

What happens when we are not in a position to have direct experience? For instance, let us suppose an acquaintance has borrowed a large sum of money from me, and has repeatedly failed to return it when promised. If he called me and said that he came to my office and didn't find me there, I would not be inclined to believe him. Suppose, however, that three of my colleagues saw him knocking on my door, and then leaving, and told me so, thereby corroborating his statement. Even though I did not actually see him, it is now perfectly rational to subscribe to the belief that he did come to my office when I was away. Such a belief would be based on testimonies, not on direct experience.

If we are not in a position to have direct experience, the next best option is to accept the testimonies of those who have. We may therefore expand C' as C'':

C''. *Justification:* The statements that we believe or claim to be true about the world must be justified on the basis of our experience of the world, and/or testimonies of others on their experience, together with reasoning where necessary.

The commitment to C'' rules out from rational knowledge beliefs based on dogma (It is true because X says so), conformity (It is true because

everyone else thinks it is true), appeal to mortal authority (It is true because my teacher says so), and appeal to divine authority (It is true because my scriptures say so). Such appeals are excluded from academic inquiry, though not, say, from theology and various systems of classical medicine.

Deductive justification

For several centuries, in the Western tradition ranging from Plato to Descartes, Euclidean geometry was looked upon as a model for all human knowledge. Until the end of the nineteenth century, the postulates of mathematical systems were regarded as *a priori* truths about the world. Since the theorems are "proved" (that is, arrived at from the premises through valid deductive logic), if mathematical axioms are *a priori* truths about the world, it follows that mathematical theorems are also truths about the world. This picture of the relation between mathematics and the world was shattered by the discovery of non-Euclidean geometries based on axioms different from those of Euclid. The result was the recognition of a fundamental difference between formal knowledge of the kind provided by mathematics and logic (if such and such statements are true, then such and such other statements are also true), and the knowledge of the world provided by disciplines as diverse as physics, biology, anthropology, history, philosophy of science, and literary criticism (such and such statements are true of the world).

Theorems in the formal sciences (mathematics and logic) are justified on the basis of pure reasoning, without the need to point to experience. In contrast, observational statements are justified by appealing to a direct match with experience.[1] The justification of theoretical hypotheses in empirical sciences involves the appeal to both experience and reasoning. The centrality of evidence and reasoning articulated in (D) is what distinguishes rational knowledge from other forms of knowledge, such as mysticism, intuition, tradition, and commonsense.

Mathematics requires the most stringent form of justification, namely, proof or deductive justification. Thus, a conjecture in mathematics

[1] As pointed out earlier, statements about the world (e.g., sugar is sweet; everything attracts everything else with a force directly proportional to the product of their masses and indirectly proportional to the square distance between them; mangoes are sweeter than lemons) are justified in terms of our experience of the world.

becomes a theorem when we find a proof. In contrast, theories in natural sciences cannot be proved to be true: they can only be justified through non-deductive forms of reasoning.

Equating justification with deductive justification, philosopher Descartes proposed the program of deducing all knowledge from the self-evident axiom "I think." in such a way that every proposition in the body of knowledge was beyond the *least shadow of doubt*. Subsequently, philosopher Hume pointed out that the Cartesian program was impossible, because generalizations based on observations are justified in terms of inductive, not deductive reasoning, and hence are not deductively justified. Scientific theories are justified in terms of speculative-deductive reasoning, not deductive reasoning, and hence the Cartesian program is impossible for science as well. Finally, extending the Cartesian thought experiment to the famous brain-in-the vat conundrum, Harvard philosopher Hilary Putnam showed that no individual can deductively demonstrate even the single observation that (s)he has a body, since there is no way of ruling out the possibility that (s)he is simply a brain in the vat of an alien scientist feeding various inputs to the brain to create the illusion that it has a body and is interacting with people.[2] In sum, whether in terms of a single observation, a generalization based on a set of observations, or an explanation for a set of generalization, the Cartesian program of deductive justification that demands certainty without the shadow of doubt is impossible. Hence, it is imperative that the concept of justification be interpreted in a broad sense going beyond justification in terms of classical deductive reasoning.

Degrees of objectivity

Neither experience (including sensory experience) nor testimonies of others is guaranteed to be an error-free source of knowledge. We have all seen rainbows in the sky, but we also know that there is no such "thing" as the rainbow, that it is an illusion created by the bending of light rays passing through droplets of water. That we see a star at location X in the sky does not necessarily allow us to conclude that there is a star at location X in the sky: perhaps our sensory experience of the star is the result of light rays from a star that died a few decades ago.

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[2] H. Putnam, "The brain in the vat conundrum," *Reason, Truth, and History*.

Compare the following examples:

Example I:	
Evidence:	I saw a book on the table in front of me.
Conclusion:	There was a book on the table.
Example II:	
Evidence:	I saw a rod half immersed in water in front of me, bent at the point of immersion.
Conclusion:	There was a rod half immersed in water, bent at the point of immersion.

We consider the conclusion in the first example as justified. The conclusion in the second example, however, we treat as a mistake because we have evidence from other sources to believe that the sensory experience reported here is an illusion. In other words, experience, sensory or otherwise, can be misleading in the sense that it can lead us to incorrect observations on the world.

Because we are aware of this pitfall, we look for additional evidence to **corroborate** or **correct** our initial conclusions based on sensory experience. Let us suppose that we see a jar on a stand on the table. We legitimately conclude that there is a solid object (a jar) on a stand on the table on the basis of visual sensory experience. We now feel the jar with our fingers, and the tactile sensory experience corroborates our earlier conclusion that there is a solid object on the stand in front of us. Now, suppose our fingers had passed right through the jar, without meeting with resistance. We would then have concluded the opposite, namely, that there is no solid object on the stand in front of us, and that the earlier conclusion based on visual sensory experience was false. The new conclusion would have been that there is a hologram of a jar in front of us, not a real jar.

Let us take another example. Suppose you walk into a room, and see two suitcases on the floor. You try to lift them, and you find that you can lift suiticase A with some effort, but suitcase B is impossible to lift. You will conclude that suiticase B is much heavier than suitcase A. Given the information that you have, your conclusion, based on the sensation of strain on your muscles when you try to pull something, is quite justifiable. However, suppose you now open the two suitcases, and find that suitcase

A is full of books while suitcase B is empty. You will doubt your earlier conclusion, and wonder why you were unable to lift suitcase B. On futher examination, you notice that suitcase B is screwed to the floor. On the basis of this additional information through the visual channel, you will now conclude that your earlier conclusion was false, and that suitcase A is heavier than suitcase B. The sensation of strain on your muscles need not always be a consequence of the weight of an object, though it is often so.

Let us go back to our earlier example of the visual sensory experience of a jar on a stand, which could be a real jar or a hologram. Suppose we try to pick up what we visually interpreted as the jar. Our fingers touch something solid and heavy, and we pick it up. On the basis of tactile-kinesthetic experience, we will conclude that our internal visual experience of the jar is not an illusion, but is triggered by the "objective" reality of a jar out there in the real world. The sense of objectivity in this case is the result of the eye, the skin, and the muscles pointing to the same conclusion. To put it differently, what the eye says is **corroborated** by what the skin and muscles say.

A characteristic that increases the credibility of a claim about the world is its being justified by evidence from many independent sources:

E. *Independent corroboration:* A conclusion justified by the convergence of evidence from independent sources of evidence (= independently corroborated by different sources of evidence) has greater credibility. The greater the convergence of evidence, the greater the credibility of a statement about the world.

Suppose someone tells us that a close friend of ours has been speaking ill of us to our associates. We will probably dismiss it as a rumour. However, if several people tell us the same thing independently of one another, we will probably change our mind and begin to think that the report may have some truth in it. Corroboration triggers conviction.

If we hear a voice from inside a room, we are justified in believing that there is someone inside the room. If we now open the door and see someone inside the room, the belief based on our auditory experience is

corroborated by our visual experience. If, on the other hand, we do not see anyone inside, we tend to look for recorded speech as the source of the auditory experience. The claim that the accused is guilty of murder, argued on the basis of evidence from an eyewitness (who saw the accused covered in blood on the night of the murder) is made more credible if corroborated by finger prints of the accused on the murder weapon.

Corroboration is a form of coherence, the way different statements fit together. Hence, we may take the requirement of increased corroboration as a special case of the requirement of increased coherence as applied to our knowledge of the world.

We may now define **objectivity** as *independent corroboratability*. Let us suppose that Jen Flagerty wakes up in the morning one day, and recalls the sense of a stranger being near her bed at night. She would probably dismiss it a dream, an extreme case of subjective experience. However, if her sister wakes up and reports the same feeling of a stranger being inside the room at night, Jen would conclude that her initial feeling was not so subjective at all, because it is corroborated by her sister's impression. If she now sees that her window is forced open, and her jewelry is missing, the sense of objectivity would be further heightened. What started out as a purely subjective experience now has become objective reality.

From the purely subjective to totally objective is a continuum. We may say that there is nothing that we can prove to be totally objective. However, the greater the degree of independent corroboratability, the greater the degree of objectivity. Given that increased corroboration is a special case of the requirement of coherence, it follows that objectivity is a special case of coherence.

Yet another special case of independent corroboration is **replicability**, an important consideration in scientific experiments. If John Briggs sees flying horses at midnight every day, chances are that he and others are likely to treat it as an instance of hallucination. However, if several others independently see flying horses at midnight, i.e., if his observation is replicated by others, we are unlikely to attribute it to collective hallucination. Instead, we might think of the possibility that someone has invented a flying machine that looks like a horse. Replicability of experimental results is conventionally required in scientific inquiry:

> "I meditated for four months in the mountains, and at the end of my meditation, it was revealed to me that Einstein's theory of relativity is false. Therefore I am justified in believing that Einstein's theory of relativity is false."
> "Last night, an angel told me in my dreams that Hitler was not responsible for the killing of Jews. Therefore I am justified in believing that Hitler was innocent."

These forms of justification are inadmissible in a form of inquiry that subscribes to (C'').

Many mystical modes explicitly reject (A)-(C'') as not only inadequate but misleading.[3]

4. The Rational Mindset

Uncertainty of knowledge

In the preceding discussion, we had many examples of mistaken conclusions, whether based on experience or testimonies. Now, if there is one characteristic that distinguishes the spirit of twentieth (and twenty first) century science from that of the past, it is an awareness of the fallibility and uncertainty of human knowledge, and the resulting need for systematic questioning. The human mind has a natural desire for total certainty, and a tendency to accept as certain what on closer examination reveals itself to be less than totally certain. It is important therefore to be constantly watchful. Let us state this recognition as follows.

F. *Fallibility and uncertainty:* Human knowledge is fallible and uncertain.

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[3] I am not rejecting the mystical mode of inquiry, or saying that the rational mode is superior to the mystical mode. Nor that it is impossible to provide a rational argument against the mystic's position, or a rational argument to show that the rational mode is superior to the mystical mode: any rational argument presupposes a commitment to the value of rationality which the mystic rejects, so we cannot rationally argue for rationality without the vicious cycle of presupposing what we wish to argue for.

G. *Requirement of questioning:* Hence, statements that we believe or claim to be true must be subjected to systematic questioning.

This awareness lies at the heart of not only history and anthropology, but also physics and biology.

If we wish, we may refer to (F) and (G) as the "postmodern" condition. but it might be useful to remember that it had its origins in early twentieth century science, long before the postmodern discourses discovered the condition. As Richard Feynman puts it:

> "The scientist has a lot of experience with ignorance and doubt and uncertainty, and this experience is of very great importance, I think. When a scientist doesn't know the answer to a problem, he is ignorant. When he has a hunch as to what the result is, he is uncertain. And when he is pretty darn sure of what the result is going to be, he is still in some doubt. We have found it of paramount importance that in order to progress we must recognize our ignorance and leave room for doubt. Scientific knowledge is a body of statements of varying degrees of certainty — some most unsure, some nearly sure, but none *absolutely* certain. Now, we scientists are used to this, and we take it for granted that it is perfectly consistent to be unsure, that it is possible to live and *not* know. But I don't know if everyone realizes this is true. Our freedom to doubt was borne out of a struggle against authority in the early days of science. It was a very deep and long struggle: permit us to question–to doubt—to not be sure. I think that it is important that we do not forget this struggle and thus lose what we have gained. Herein lies a responsibility to society."[4]

Commitment to minimizing uncertainty and error

Having pointed out the importance of uncertainty and the need for questioning, we should also take into consideration what Feynman says about degrees of uncertainty. Though our knowledge is fallible and uncertain, it is not completely unreliable or false either, and not all statements are equal with regard to the degree of certainty. Our third commitment, therefore, is to that of increasing the credibility of what we

[4] Richard Feynman, *"What do you care what other people think?"* p. 245.

take as knowledge:

H. *Systematicity and rigour:* We should do the best we can to increase the reliability of human knowledge by being as systematic and as rigorous as possible, minimizing the possibility of errors, reducing the degree of uncertainty and increasing accuracy.

The commitment to (H) distinguishes natural sciences from some of the postmodernist approaches in the humanities and the social sciences. It drives us to the use of precise measurements in situations where it is meaningful (e.g. measurement of length and weight, but not beauty and happiness), and the use of rigorous mathematical modelling where appropriate and feasible (e.g. in the physical sciences but not when making ethical decisions). We resort to systematic experimental strategies with controlled variables (e.g. in studying the movement of electrons and the effects of brain impairments in rats) but are satisfied with less rigorous means where experimentation is not feasible (e.g. the movement of planets and the effects of brain impairment in humans). The degree of rigour and systematicity in rational inquiry varies across domains, but what is important is the commitment to maximize rigour and systematicity wherever possible and useful.

Collective verification and authentication

Human beings have the natural tendency to conform to the beliefs of their community. Given this tendency, it is not surprising to find that there is considerable overlap between the *private knowledge* of an individual and the *public knowledge* of the community. However, there are three important ways in which the two can be different, namely:

Some of the statements of a given individual's knowledge may be irrelevant for the purposes of public knowledge. (e.g. I happen to know that there was a red car parked near the library at 11 am on 22 February 1999, but this piece of information has no relevance for public knowledge.)

Some of the statements of a given individual's private knowledge may not have entered public knowledge. (e.g. I have discovered something interesting about the Malayalam syntax, but I have not written a paper about it and hence no one else knows about it.)

> An individual may disagree with the other members of the community, and hold views that are not in conformity with the community. (e.g. I happen to believe that the currently dominant theory of Optimality Theory is mistaken in using ranking as the formal device for conflict resolution, but I have not managed to convince my research community yet.)

Given the distinction between private knowledge and public knowledge, rational inquiry makes a set of demands on the statements that enter the realm of public knowledge from the realm of private knowledge. Recall that the justification of statements about the world involve appeal to experience. In the formation of public knowledge, we demand that experiential statements be collectively verifiable:

I. *Collective verifiability of experience:* The statements of experience that we appeal to in our justification must be open to independent verification. That is to say, experiential statements must be such that when exposed to the same trigger or situation, different individuals in the community must not disagree on whether the statement is true or false for that trigger or situation.

This commitment rules out beliefs based on hallucinations and dreams (non-replicable sensory perceptions), personal tastes (e.g. garlic tastes foul) and mystical revelations (e.g. I know it is true because an angel revealed it to me yesterday), but allows interpersonally corroborated experience (e.g. we are justified in believing that boiling water falling on our body causes physical pain, and the loss of a loved one causes grief).

A similar condition on independent authentication applies to reasoning as well:

J. *Collective authentication of reasoning:* The reasoning that we appeal to in our justification must be open to independent authentication. That is to say, given a chain of reasoning, different individuals in the community must not disagree on whether it is legitimate or not.

This commitment requires that the members of the community have an explicit or implicit agreement on the rules of inference that connect the premises to the conclusions, and the ground rules on the basis of which we decide whether a statement is true or false. The reasoning in mathematical proofs, for instance, is restricted to deductive reasoning, while the reasoning in empirical generalizations is inductive. The use of these modes of reasoning is agreed upon in the respective communities.

5. Scientific Inquiry

The general principles of rationality stated above are common to all forms of academic inquiry, ranging from philosophy and history to physics and mathematics. In addition to the principles listed above, one may acknowledge (L)-(N) as the central characteristics of theoretical research in the natural sciences, extendable in principle to other domains as well:

K. *Sensory perception:* What our sense organs tell us about the world is credible. Statements about the world must be justified in terms of replicable sensory experience.

L. *Explanation*: Observations must be accompanied by explanations of what we find puzzling in the observations.

M. *Motivation*: Constructs in knowledge propositions must be motivated i.e., shown to be useful for some purpose, where purpose = description, explanation, action, etc.). Theoretical constructs (i.e., classificatory or hypothetical constructs that are postulated in explanations) must be motivated by their usefulness in providing explanations.

The axiom in (K) is a special form of the axiom of the credibility of our experience, which forms one of the two parts of (C'').

In addition, scientific inquiry demands (N) and (O) of its theories:

N. *Correct predictions:* Scientific theories must correctly predict the observations.

O. *Generality and simplicity:* Scientific theories must be as simple and general as possible.

We may think of the requirement of correct predictions (N) as a special case of the requirement of fit with experience (D). Though inquiry in humanities (e.g. history, literary theory) is subject to experience based justification (C'') and fit with experience (D), they are not subject to the specialized conditions in (N)-(O).

6. Conflict resolution

What happens when inferences from axioms (A)-(O) result in conflicts with one another? Take the axiom of the credibility of the sense organs. Under normal circumstances, if we see a vase on a table in front of us, we take it as true that there is a vase on the table, trusting the credibility of what our eyes tell us. However, if we try to pick up the vase and our hands pass through the vase, we conclude that the vase is an optical illusion (a hologram), and there is no vase in front of us. Potentially, the inferences that there is a vase and there is no vase in front of us violate the condition on logical consistency, and hence at least one of the inferences should be ruled out. In this particular case, we assign lower priority to our eyes, and conclude that what our hands tell us is more credible.

Rationality demands that we assign highest priority to the prohibition of logical contradictions, which itself is an axiomatic commitment.

P. *Priority of consistency:* Given a conflict between experience (including (K)) on the one hand, and the prohibition of logical contradictions on the other, the latter has priority.

Given (K), it follows that we would trust what our eyes and hands tell us, and conclude that there both is a vase and isn't a vase in front of us. However, given (P), such a conclusion is illegitimate. Given the conflict between (K) and (P), the winner is (P). Hence we conclude that at least one of the senses is not telling us the truth. Had we assigned higher priority to (K) instead, we would have chosen to believe that there is a

vase in front of us and that there is no vase in front of us, violating the prohibition of inconsistency.

To illustrate further the centrality of (P) in rationality, consider the following axiomatic commitment in certain forms of theological inquiry.

Q. *Credibility of the scriptures:* What the scriptures tell us is credible.

As stated earlier, commitment to (Q) is excluded in academic disciplines, and even forms of metaphysics, but it is found in many forms of theological inquiry. What happens when scriptures contain logical contradictions? Rationality demands that we take logical consistency to have priority over (Q), and reject at least one of the two contradictory propositions in the strictures. Alternatively, we may step outside the bounds of rationality, and, assigning highest priority to (Q), embrace the logical contradiction in the scriptures as truth.[5] If so, (Q) can be replaced by the stronger version in (R):

R. *Infallibility of the scriptures:* What the scriptures tell us is infallible.

Having acknowledged the axiomatic commitment to (Q) as being consistent with rationality (but not in academic disciplines) as long as the prohibition of logical consistency is prior to (Q), we can now see how science and fundamentalist theology diverge in their approach to knowledge. What happens when there is a conflict between (A) to (P) on the one hand, and (Q) on the other? A clear example is the conflict between Evolutionary Theory in biology and the Creationist Theory based on the literal interpretation of the Bible. If we take (R) to have priority over the combination of (A) to (O), the prohibition of logical contradictions demands that we reject the evolutionary theory. If, on the other hand, we take (A) to (P) to have priority over (R), we have to reject the creationist account. Are they both forms of rationality? Yes. Are they both forms of academic rationality? No: academic inquiry demands that we either reject (R) or at least take (A) to (Q) to have priority over (R).

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[5] As pointed out earlier, the position that rationality is limited and that we need to accept logical contradictions to understand reality is found in certain forms of mysticism as well.

Our final example comes from a widely used axiom in everyday life:

S. *Credibility of the knowledgeable*: What credible people tell us is credible.

As in the case of (R), appeal to the credibility of people is inadmissible in academic argumentation, but is commonly used in argumentation in the law court in accepting conclusions and informed opinions of specialists as reliable evidence. Notice that there is a conflict between (S) on the one hand, and the combination of (A) to (Q) on the other. The demands of (A) to (Q) require us to check the evidence and argumentation on our own before accepting a knowledge claim, but when we have no direct access to the relevant evidence, or when the evidence is too specialized for us to process, we relax (A)-(Q) and go by (S) in every day life. However, when the results of (A) to (Q) conflict with those of (S), we go by the former.

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Divine Qualities of Spiritual Dialogue

Piya Tan

Abstract

Each religion needs an honest way of relating to other religions in an open society that would be mutually beneficial, or at least reflective of historical truth. The Buddhist basis for dialogue is found in its teaching of the "four god-like qualities" (*brahma, vihra*) of love, compassion, altruistic joy and equanimity.

By love is meant that Buddhism gives a central place to man's spirituality and the world as an extended family, including other religions. Compassion implies a willingness to listen to others. Altruistic joy is the willingness to joyfully learn from the success of others, for every religion has something to teach us even if we are not its followers. Equanimity is the courage to look at the spirituality of others even as one's own, at a level when truth defies words and points in the same direction of liberation.

1. Reason for Dialogue

For me, the most wonderful thing today, right now, is that so many religions are here represented, gathered together in peace and sharing.[1] This alone is a great achievement for us all gathered here if we contrast the harmony here with the suffering, injustice and ignorance that have been propagated in the name of religion (and continue be so done in some places even today). But man cannot live by bread or rice alone, he must have faith. Even if his rice has bits of sand in it, he has to feed himself, for he is ever hungry.

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[1] At the 6th Singapore Bahá'í Studies Conference

The title chosen by the Bahá'í Studies Conference[2] is significant because many (and a growing number) of followers of the world's religions do not regard their faith as a "religion" (i.e. a system of beliefs and worship) but as something encompassing every aspect of their lives as individuals and as a community, in short, as a culture or civilization. And there are many civilizations, many religions. Even within each there are diverse systems.

Not everyone, certainly not everyone of a single civilization, is religious. Indeed, there are systems, movements, groups and individuals that are totally non-religious or try to be so, such as the materialists, agnostics, atheists, and free-thinkers. Perhaps this is one reason why the cover letter to this Dialogue contains the term "epistemic systems" (which, to my understanding, attempt at a scientific study of knowledge).

Such a dialogue would not only keep us abreast of one another despite our differences, but in communicating, we would also learn from each other to be able to work better in a multi-religious society, and to benefit the world at large. In short, dialogue with other civilizations, with other religions, can help us become better followers and members of our own civilization or religion.

2. Difficult Beginnings

The Bahá'í Faith had a difficult and painful beginning. Many thousands were murdered and persecuted for their faith. For teaching a powerful new faith, Bahá'u'lláh (Mírzá Husayn 'Alí Núri) himself was imprisoned in the notorious Black Pit in Iran, and then exiled to Turkey where he was put under house-arrest by the powerful who felt threatened by his spirituality.

Buddhists would see the suffering Bahá'u'lláh as a Bodhisattva, as a person of great spiritual compassion and wisdom working under insuperable difficulties for the benefit of others. Suffering is nothing new in Buddhism. It is the beginning of Buddhism: that suffering is a universal fact. Indeed, the reflection on suffering is the beginning of religion and philosophy.

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[2] Dialogue Among Civilizations

3. Suffering as a Lesson

Suffering, the Buddha teaches, arises from our ignorance, or more specifically, from our greed, hatred and delusion (the three roots of evil). Conversely, suffering can also arise externally, caused by the ignorant, the greedy, the hateful and the deluded. In short, very often we have to suffer for what we believe in and for what we love. This suffering is greater where the spirituality is deeper. The shadow is darkest where the light is brightest!

Like Bahá'ís, Buddhists have a proverbial propensity for tolerance—tolerance in the sense that every moment of suffering, every episode of difficulty, is a lesson for spiritual development. That is, if we seek to understand the suffering, to accept it as a teacher. (How true it rings when a wise teacher tells his pupil, "Let this be a *lesson* to you!")

Why tolerance? We are all like **the man pierced with a painful arrow**. To a speculative young man, the Buddha once said, imagine a man who is pierced with an arrow, thickly smeared with poison, and friends and relatives bring along a doctor. Would the doctor ask all kinds of questions like "what class did the person who shot the arrow come from?" or "what colour was the person?" or "what height was he?" or "what kind of bow was it?" or "what kind of arrow was it?" By the time all the answers were obtained, the victim would have died. Instead, the wise doctor would immediately pull the poisoned arrow out. Then the doctor might ask whatever questions he has.[3]

What does this mean? Let me invoke the compassionate wisdom of a Dominican monk, Abbe **Dominique Pire** (1910-1969), the Nobel Prize winner for peace (1958), who said, "What matters is not the difference between believers and unbelievers, but between those who care and those who do not care."[4] And this care must come as soon as possible, if not immediately, like running out of "a burning house" (to echo the urgency sounded in the Lotus Sutra).

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[3] Majjhima Nikaya 1:429 f.; cf. M 2:216. 2:258, 259.
[4] E. Fromm, *On Being Human*, p. 93.

4. Man-Centered

The reason for this outlook is because, like the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism too is **man-centred**. Bahá'u'lláh calls man "the noblest and most perfect of all created things." In the Buddha's Teaching, being human is over and over again declared to be the best state for spiritual development and liberation.

Both the Bahá'í Faith and Buddhism take man as the starting point in their spiritual quest. Both regard God as unknowable, even more so in the case of the Bahá'í Faith. For Bahá'ís, God is, and has always been, the Creator. Buddhists, too, accept the idea of a Creator, but this is the mind. This universe, Buddhists believe, is mind-created. However, Buddhists do not worship the mind, but seek to understand it and to liberate it.

5. Heaven and Hell

Both our faiths teach about heaven and hell. For Bahá'ís, heaven and hell are symbolic of the soul's relationship to God. Nearness to God results in good deeds resulting in infinite joy, while distance from Him leads to evil and suffering. Buddhists regard heaven and hell as happy states and suffering states that are both impermanent and immanent, that is to say, within our own being.

There is an ancient Indian parable which, like any good parable, has traveled across continents. This one peregrinated all the way to Japan. I will relate the Zen version in my own words. Once a samurai was meditating, and a curious young man comes along and asks him:

> "Where is hell?"

The samurai remains silent, so the young man keeps on asking the question. Then the samurai gets up and brandishing his sword, chases off the young man:

> "This is hell!" shouts the samurai.

The brave young man, somewhat careful and clever, still running, glances back, and then asks:

"Where is heaven?"

The samurai abruptly stops, and lowers his sword:

"This is heaven! Because I'm not going to kill you!"

As Zen Buddhist tradition goes, the young man probably became enlightened after that harrowing experience.

6. Mankind is One

For Buddhists, godliness has the four qualities of **love, compassion, altruistic joy** and **equanimity**. By love here is meant an unconditional attitude towards others as if we were their mother. Yes, the symbolism here is that of a "mother," a feminine figure, since only she is capable of bearing and nurturing life.

If we regard others as our own children, then it is easy to regard the world as one community, which is a very important Bahá'í teaching. "The Bahá'í Faith," Shoghi Effendi declares, "proclaims the necessity and the inevitability of the unification of mankind."[5] Furthermore, he also declares the following noble aspirations:

> "It unequivocally maintains the principle of equal rights, opportunities and privileges for men and women, insists on compulsory education, eliminates extremes of poverty and wealth, abolishes the institution of priesthood, prohibits slavery, asceticism, mendicancy, and monasticism, prescribes monogamy, discourages divorce, emphasizes the necessity of strict obedience to one's government, exalts any work performed in the spirit of service to the level of worship, urges either the creation or the selection of an auxiliary international language, and delineates the

[5] Shoghi Effendi, *Guidance for Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 3-4.

outlines of those institutions that must establish and perpetuate the general peace of mankind."[6]

Any informed Buddhist can easily identify with such a global spirit, and we have a lot to learn from the Bahá'ís here. However, it is only fair for me to remark that Buddhist social activism and social work are even now a common thread in the fabric of Western society, especially in the US. In Thailand, too, we have a number of well-known living social activists, like **Sulak Sivaraksa** (himself imprisoned a number of times for his stand), who echo such noble and universal sentiments of the Bahá'ís.

7. Engagement

I find it very interesting that Shoghi Effendi in his statement asserts that the Bahá'í Faith "prohibits..asceticism, mendicancy, and monasticism..".[7] Historically, Buddhism began as an ascetic, mendicant and monastic system, mainly in response to the Indian society at the time. However, very few Buddhists today are ascetics, mendicants or monastics. Rather, such options serve as one of many choices that Buddhists have as tools or "skillful means" in their spiritual quests.

In one of his books, Sulak Sivaraksa once related an instruction by a Siamese king to his son: "If you want to lead an easy and wealthy life, become a monk; if you want to help the people, be a good king."[8]

Certainly in Singapore today, there is a growing movement towards the secularizing of Buddhism, meaning here that more lay Buddhists are giving more quality time to social and spiritual work, towards building an emotionally and spiritually more healthy and affluent Singapore.

I must, on the other hand, add that in response to this open spirit, there is a new generation of Sangha members who are **"engaged" Buddhists**, that is, those who are proactive in people-helping. Many members of the

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[6] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Personal communication from Sulak Sivaraksa (International Network of Engaged Buddhists, Bangkok).

Buddhist monastic order here, for example, have started hospitals, free clinics and schools in Singapore and elsewhere.

There are the Ren Ci Buddhist Hospitals (two of them caring for those with chronic illnesses) run by Ven. Ming Yi, and a new one (under Ven. Kuan Yan) will begin operating later this year (2001). The Taiwanese nun, Ven. Zeng Yan also has her branch hospital called Chuzhi in Kreta Ayer, Singapore. I know of at least five Buddhist free clinics here. There are also a growing number of Buddhist workers involved in personal counselling, prison ministry and hospice work.

8. Compassion

Earlier I mentioned the four god-like virtues beginning with love. The second of these virtues is **compassion**. While love here refers to a selfless mother-like nurturing attitude towards others, compassion is a proactive response to the needs and failures of others. This response is, of course, rooted in selfless love.

Like water finding its own level, the compassionate heart naturally seeks to bring the less fortunate to a more wholesome level conducive to spiritual development. Why is compassion vital in spiritual life, especially for Buddhists? This is because the human state is an imperfect state to begin with, that is, for as long as humans have vital needs and unsatisfied wants.

This common ground of compassion is also the basis for spiritual dialogue, since it involves the putting aside of differences. Says the Buddha:

> "As for those things, my friend, on which we do not agree, let us leave them alone. As to those things that we do agree, let the wise put questions about them, ask for reasons as to them, talk them over with their teacher, with their fellow disciples."[9]

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[9] Digha Nikaya 1:163.

9. Altruistic Joy

Now we come to an interesting aspect of the four god-like virtues, namely, **altruistic joy**, that is, rejoicing in the goodness and success of others. When a child is young, the mother lovingly cares for it, and with compassion protects it from harm and danger. When the child is more grown up and independent, and able to play by himself, the mother looks on with joy, altruistic joy, thinking, "Oh, how my child has grown!"

Even so, in spiritual dialogue, we must have this motherly altruistic joy to appreciate the goodness and success of other faiths. Of course, we must admit an ulterior motive in all this! (All religions also teach truthfulness.) We need to keep up with the progress and problems of other religions so that we are not out of touch with social realities or lose sight of new ways of looking at spirituality.

10. Cross-influences

In their apologetics and hermeneutics, the defence and propagation of their faith, not all religions would readily admit that at various times in their history they were influenced by other religions. And yet we find interesting parallels and coincidences in the lives of our spiritual founders and teachers (as in St. Luke's Gospel account of Christ's life and the life of the Buddha, and the Hindu adoption of the Buddha as an avatar). Ancient Buddhists have themselves transformed India's rich store of folklore into the well-known Jataka stories, very similar to Aesop's fables, to bring Buddhism down to the level of the common people.[10]

In ancient China, the successes of Taoism and Buddhism presented a serious threat to Confucianism, whose pragmatism and primary concerns with political and ethical issues failed to be a part of the lives of the common people, as did the devotionalism of Pure Land Buddhism and the magical panaceas of Taoism. It was to fill this gap in Confucianism that there arose a movement known in modern scholarship as Neo-Confucianism.

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[10] For a comprehensive idea of this, we only need to read such works as Hajime Nakamura's *A Comparative History of Ideas.*

The major proponent of **Neo-Confucianism** was Chuxi (Chu Hsi), regarded as the most influential Chinese philosopher in the last 1000 years. Through his genius, he incorporated Buddhist meditation ("quiet sitting") into his system, among other things. His Neo-Confucianism long dominated Chinese intellectual life. It won political patronage in Korea and Japan, and deeply influenced the daily lives of those in these civilizations.

Neo-Confucianism was introduced into Japan in the mediaeval period, not by Confucianists, but by Zen Buddhists. It then became the state philosophy of the Tokugawa feudal regime (1603-1867), and profoundly influenced the thought and behaviour of the literati. Neo-Confucianism went on to contribute to the development of the Bushido (Code of the Warriors), which is a cultural root for contemporary Japan's economic success.

11. Adaptation

In his 1994 Jordan Lectures, the Pali Text Society (London) President, Richard Gombrich, spoke on "How Buddhism Began." In his very first lecture, he explained why in the record of the Buddha's 45-year public ministry, there were apparent inconsistencies of expression and terminologies. He quoted T.W. Rhys Davids (founder of the Pali Text Society) as saying:

> "When speaking on sacrifice to a sacrificial priest, on union with God to an adherent of the current theology, on Brahman claims to superior social rank to a proud Brahman, on mystic insight to a man who trusts in it, on the soul to one who believes in the soul theory, the method he follows is always the same. Gotama puts himself as far as possible in the mental position of the questioner."[11]

[11] Introduction to *Dialogues of the Buddha*, part 1, 1899:206-7.

We have scriptural evidence for **the Buddha's protean teaching method** for the sake of effective spiritual dialogue. For example, in the Discourse on the Great Final Decease (Maha Parinibbana Sutta), the Buddha says:

> "Now I call to mind, Ananda, how when I used to enter an assembly of many hundred kshatriyas, nobles...brahmins...householders..wanderers.. the heavenly hosts of the Guardian Kings...of the Heaven of the Thirty-three devas...of the Maras (Evil Ones), and of the Brahmas (High Gods), before I had seated myself there or talked to them..., I used to assume a colour like theirs, and (spoke) in a voice like theirs. Then with religious discourse I used to instruct and move them, and fill them with gladness. But they knew me not when I spoke, and would say: "Who is this who speaks thus? Is he a man or a god?"..."[12]

12. Jesuits in China

In the early days when the Christian powers of the West came to the East for "gospel, glory and gold," their missionaries adopted a similar protean approach. The most remarkable case was that of the Jesuit **Matteo Ricci** (1552-1610) who first entered China dressed in a Buddhist monk's robes. Then following the advice of Chinese friends he had made, he changed into the garb of a Confucian scholar to win entry into the higher levels of Chinese society.

Let me clarify here, quoting the famous Trappist monk and writer, Thomas Merton, that when Ricci dressed as a Confucian scholar, "this was not a Jesuitical disguise. The Jesuits wore the traditional robes of the Chinese scholar because they earned the right to do so just as seriously as any other Chinese scholar...by their knowledge of science and philosophy."[13]

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[12] *Digha Nikaya* 2:109, abridged.
[13] T. Merton, *Mystics & Zen Masters*, p. 81.

13. Accommodations

Having finally received permission to enter the Forbidden City, Beijing, in 1600, Ricci won imperial favour by his skill in regulating clocks and making maps. Being a man of extraordinary learning, he mastered the Chinese language, comprehended Chinese culture, and adapted Catholic rites for Chinese converts—a process known as "accommodation" by which he bent Christian dogma to conform to the Confucian world-view. The number of converts grew, even more were there who admired his scholarship and personality.

Then followed two other famous Jesuits who continued his successful missionizing of and dialogue with the Chinese. The first Chinese bishop was consecrated in 1685. In 1692 an imperial edict tolerating Christianity brought Franciscan and Dominican missions to China. They rejected the Jesuit "accommodations," particularly for funerals, ancestor-worship and titles for God, and the Chinese Rites Controversy raged from 1693 to 1705.

The Jesuits obtained an imperial ruling upholding their view that Chinese rites had no heretical religious significance, but in 1704 (again in 1715 and 1742) the Holy See, taking "the safer and more conservative course in order to limit the spread of the controversy"[14] ruled against the Jesuit practice. The Chinese Emperor thereupon expelled all the Christian priests who refused to accept "accommodations" and so official toleration of Christianity ended abruptly.

14. Re-evaluation

In his book, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, Merton remarks that only in recent years (i.e. the middle of the last century) have we begun to appreciate the significance of Matteo Ricci's entering Beijing "with his map of the world, his clock, his telescope, and his hydraulic machines." In fact, Merton gives an impassioned vindication of the sad misunderstanding regarding "The Jesuits in China" in a whole chapter in the same book. His writing is so important that I shall quote what I think is most relevant to us

[14] T. Merton, *Mystics & Zen Masters*, p. 88.

here, who are interested in spiritual dialogue, and above all, in tasting the true spirit of our own faiths. Of the true meaning and profound importance of Ricci's "originality," Merton writes:

> "He not only made an intelligent diagnosis of a totally unfamiliar condition, but also, by implication, diagnosed *his own* condition and that of Western Christian civilization as a whole. In confronting the culture, the philosophy, and the religion of China, he immediately took stock of Catholicism as he had known it in Italy, and in the light granted him by the Holy Spirit he distinguished what was essentially Christian and truly Catholic—that is, universal—from cultural and accidental accretions proper to a certain time and place. Guided by the Holy Spirit, he was able to sacrifice all that was secondary and accidental. Like a true missionary, he divested himself of all that belonged to his own country and his own race and adopted all that belonged to the good customs and attitudes of the land to which he had been sent. Far from being a shrewd "natural" tactic, this was a supernatural and Christian sacrifice, a stripping of himself in imitation of Christ, who "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant," and of St. Paul becoming "all things to all men".[15]

15. Lèsson

I have related this interesting episode of Church history in its dark moments, what is sometimes known as **"the shadow,"** because it is a classic case of what one contemporary psychotherapist calls "a heresy of orthodoxy."[16] That is to say, the letter has killed the spirit. If not for its "shadow," in this case, the external Western forms and sectarian rivalry, the Catholic Church of Ricci's time would have successfully laid down the foundations for a more Christian China today!

Such internecine rivalry within and amongst faiths confuses their followers and keeps away potential converts. Indeed, thinking people

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 83.
[16] M. Scott Peck, *Further Along the Road Less Travelled*, p. 207.

who are dissatisfied with the rivalry of the more traditional religions, often find the Bahá'í Faith attractive.

Furthermore, if there is going to be any dialogue amongst our civilizations, we must try to rise above the letter of the dialogue as much as we can in order to taste the spirit of the guest civilizations. This is, of course, no small task, but it is not impossible. I shall now give a few remarkable examples of how this has happened between Catholic Christianity and Buddhism.

16. Revival

In fact, the revival of Hinduism and Buddhism during the 19th century owed largely to the impact of the Christian missions on them. Then, especially from the Second World War onwards, the tide turned in the other direction with a growing popular Western interest in Oriental faiths, especially in the methods of spiritual training and meditation. This new encounter rejuvenated Western Christianity in interesting ways that sadly I cannot list here due to time constraints.

The 20th century can be said to be a **"century of apologies and apologetics,"** culminating with Vatican II (1962-65) which officially opened the Church doors to ecumenical dialogue, and being punctuated by the Pope himself apologizing for the past mistakes and painful atrocities that less spiritual Catholic conquistadors, missionaries and inquisitors had committed in the name of their faith. This examination of conscience is very healing and conciliatory. Such openness promotes a spirit of generosity that allows various faiths to grow healthily amongst one another.

Modern Buddhists, I must say, have benefited significantly from this new religious glasnost. This generosity comes especially by way of the excellent scholarship of Christians who study (and even practise) Buddhism with an open mind. The famous Belgian Thomist, **Msgr. Etienne Lamotte**, has gained indisputable international authority by editing, translating and commenting on some of the most significant works of Mahayana Buddhism (such as the Surangama samadhi Sutra and the Mahayana sangraha). His magnum opus is the voluminous *Histoire du Bouddhisme Indien, des origins a l'ere Saka* (1958), translated as *History*

of Indian Buddhism, From the Origins to the Saka Era (1988). For his erudite scholarship, he was awarded the title of "Expert in Buddhist Scriptures" a few weeks before his death.

Another famous Christian scholar of Buddhism is the Jesuit **Father Heinrich Dumoulin** (1944-), who is one of the world's foremost Zen scholars. He wrote on Zen for the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Macmillan). His magnum opus is the acclaimed two-volume *Zen Buddhism: A History* (1959 in German; 1963 English translation; 1988 revised English translation).

I have already mentioned the famous Trappist monk, **Thomas Merton** (1915-1968). The Trappist Order is famous for its vow of silence. So for Father Merton, his experience of Zen meditation, besides making him an authority in that Buddhist tradition, also enriched his own Christian roots. In fact, he wrote 29 books, inspired by his quest for "trans-Christian ecumenism through religious experimentation."[17] Agehananda Bharati, in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article on "Monasticism," remarks that it is of great significance that Thomas Merton was killed in an accident while in Bangkok—he was going to visit the Dalai Lama.[18] But death has not silenced Merton. For a man of spiritual silence, he has spoken volumes!

Since late last century, we are seeing a growing number of Christian scholars of religion whose open-minded scholarship, especially in comparative religion and religious dialogue, is so learned and truthful that they could be used as textbooks in any faith (that is equally open-minded, of course). Such scholars include illustrious names like **Hans Kung** (Germany) and **John Hick** (Britain), whose remarkable works can be found in the bookshops and libraries of Singapore.

17. Bahá'í Evolution

Let me now briefly address how Bahá'ís view other religions. For Bahá'ís, although God is unknowable, he has chosen to reveal himself through his messengers or **"Manifestations"** (to use the Bahá'í term), among them

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[17] *Ency. Brit.* 12:342h.
[18] *Ibid.*

Abraham, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and the Báb, who "are one and all the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe...."[19]

Many, if not all, the religions whose founders I have mentioned, often object to this Bahá'í doctrine, that is, being reinterpreted outside their context. However, if we understand the nature of religious language, then we would be more generous and equanimous at this level of the letter. For it is only the letter of the spirit that is being traded here: the spirit of the letter remains with those who have tasted it. Like the great ocean that has only one taste, the taste of salt, the Buddha declares that the Dharma (True Teaching) has only one taste, the taste of freedom. It is a very large ocean for all to swim or sail in.

Let me elaborate on this thorny issue using Bahá'í terminology. The messengers or "Manifestations" are viewed as occupying two "stations," or occurring in two aspects. The first is "the station of pure abstraction and essential unity,"[20] in which one may speak of the oneness of the messengers of God because all are manifestations of his will and exponents of his word. This is not syncretism because the other station is "the station of distinction.... In this respect, each manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission...."[21] As such, the Bahá'ís argue, while the essence of all religions is one, each has specific features that answer the special needs of a given time and place and to the level of civilization in which the manifestation appears.

This is not exactly a new idea. Even within the Buddhist tradition itself, especially in ancient China, a number of efforts were made to classify the numerous, apparently contradicting, doctrines and discourses of Buddhism into an hierarchical system (called *pan chiao*), each level applying to its corresponding time and audience, and yet each level is unique and complete in its own way.

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[19] Bahá'u'lláh, *Book of Certitude*, pp. 99-100.
[20] *Ibid.*, p. 152.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 176.

18. Equanimity

The last of the four godly virtues on which framework this paper rests is **equanimity**. In symbolic language, we call this the "mirror-like mind" that reflects what is before it, looking at things just the way they are, and seeing ourselves as an irrevocable part of this universal network of life and light, all interconnected with a common destiny. That destiny, or purpose of life, if you like, is to grow, and there is only one kind of real growth, that is, spiritual growth.

All spiritual truths are somehow, at some level, interconnected. All religions share some parallel (even identical) doctrines, and the personal experiences of their saints often ineffably coincide. How can we, for example, discriminate between the ecstasy of St. Theresa of Avila or St. John of the Cross, and Muhammad's divine experiences, or the joyful state of a Hindu yogi, or the dhyanic bliss of a Buddhist meditator. For only one who has tasted salt knows the taste. If not, then we only need to read such works as Hajime Nakamura's *A Comparative History of Ideas* to relish scholarly examples of the amazing parallels and tangents of spirituality.

On a higher level, equanimity is an even-minded heart in the face of any crisis or situation. It is to surrender oneself to a higher will, whether one calls it God, the Holy Spirit or Bodhicitta (the will to enlightenment). We all have some goodness in our lives, be it divine grace or good deeds sown in the past. If we make no conscious effort to harbour evil, then good will follow in due course.

19. Gethsemane

I know of a Christian who was asked what for him was the most spiritually significant event in the Bible. He answered that it was the passion of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before the crucifixion. Judas had already betrayed him to the Romans. While his disciples lay asleep, Christ was alone in agonizing prayer.

Christ could have fled into the night and escaped crucifixion but he chose to stand his ground (just as the Buddha resolved not to rise from under the

Bodhi tree until he had gained enlightenment). If Christ had fled, we would not have remembered him. There would have been no Christianity. If the Buddha had walked away from the Bodhi tree, we would have had no Buddhism today.

The lesson here is very significant: in our moment of greatest spiritual crisis (or any real crisis for that matter), **we are essentially alone**. Muhammad was alone in the desert cave when an angel of God declared, "Iqra!" to him. The Buddha was all alone under the Bodhi tree, forsaken by his erstwhile attendants, the Five Monks. These remarkable giants all stood their ground until they gained spiritual insight. So were born the great world religions.

Indeed, the questions of life, death, and the beyond are too complex and profound for any one religion to pride itself with all the correct answers. Often we need to refer to different faiths like perusing valuable volumes in a spiritual library before their pages are faded or lost, or their language forgotten.

Furthermore, no religion can stand alone, not for long anyway before it is weighed down by worldly ways. We need rejuvenating voices of truth to remind us that there are other ways of looking at the same mountain and that any faith works just as well for those who believe. In this global society, we may have the power to destroy the "idols" of others, but our own idols remain insidiously in our religious shadows waiting to turn upon ourselves.

We have long passed the Axial Age (800-200 BC) when the great religions began to arise. We are now heading towards greater discovery that our different faiths share many common spiritual genes that makes us all siblings in the spirit. I shall not dwell on this point as this is a basic Bahá'í tenet: they can speak better on this matter.

The highest spiritual act for us on earth is to give of ourselves with love, compassion, joy and equanimity, to transcend our limitations, to surrender the limiting ways of the world, to walk humbly with our God, to bow deeply before the Buddha. Only when our heart and hand are open, can we receive the highest gift.

Peace in heaven and on earth!

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Understanding the Human Condition: Secular and Spiritual Perspectives

Suresh Sahadevan

Abstract

Our ideas about who we are, our purpose, and what the world is all about, significantly influence our decisions on how we shall live our lives. This paper examines concepts of the human condition and their attendant consequences. These concepts, derived from the secular (materialist) and spiritual (religious) paradigms, are compared and contrasted with each other to see which are able to best offer guidance for happiness for the individual and society. It is argued that contributions from both paradigms are important for human happiness, but it is vital that materialist explorations and pursuits are always founded upon spiritual principles. However, to retain its relevance and reverence in our contemporary era, it is important for religion to confront and address the challenges of distinguishing proper from improper practice of religion as well as working for the betterment of the world by concretely applying its core spiritual concepts to solve the major problems and difficulties of the world.

Introduction

"How shall we live?" – as individuals and as society – is a timeless question that has attracted considerable thought and reflection over millennia. Undoubtedly it is an important question and its answers will have practical consequences for every seeker bent on discovering its solutions. Though it may not be immediately apparent, the responses to this longstanding query will be framed by the answers to a second question: "Who are we?" – what is our nature, what is our condition? It is actually these latter beliefs that will guide the general direction of our

strivings in life and this remains a fact even when we deny, or do not have, any explicit thoughts or convictions on how we should live. In fact some of us may only be passively drifting along the lines of action defined for us by society, but in such instances we would be adhering to our society's overall understanding of human nature and the human condition. In brief, this second question of who we are is an inescapable prelude to knowing how indeed we should be living our lives.

In this paper, an overview of our human condition is provided from secular as well as spiritual models. Though the words secular and spiritual can be understood in several different ways, herein they will reflect essentially the non-religious and religious positions respectively. In sketching the spiritual claims on this topic, reference will be made to the Bahá'í Faith, and it will soon become apparent that these perspectives are largely eternal themes to be found in several great religions – well in keeping with the Bahá'í Faith's central principles of oneness of religions, oneness of God and oneness of mankind. The secular and spiritual perspectives of four aspects of the human condition will be looked at along the categories developed by Stevenson and Haberman[1]: (a) our understanding of human nature, (b) our understanding of the world around us, (c) our diagnosis of the causes of our main problems in life and (d) our prescription of how these problems can be resolved. In this manner the limitations and strengths of the two perspectives will be directly compared and contrasted.

Secular Perspective

The common feature of the various secular perspectives adumbrated herein is that primarily they are materialist (in the philosophical sense) and scientific in outlook. This scientific materialism is the predominant philosophy characterizing the worldview in many parts of the developed and developing world.[2]

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[1] L. Stevenson and DL. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature*, p. 9

[2] W. Barret, *Death of the Soul – Philosophical Thought from Descartes to the Computer*, p. 7

A) Human Nature

Who are we? What are we?

Is human nature to be conceptualised as a product of our biological constitution, of our psychic make-up or a product of our society? The scientific and biological perspective would have it that ultimately, in terms of our functioning at the microscopic level, all of us are reducible to a physico-chemical state. Thus all of our characteristics, including our vital functions (such as breathing, circulation, movement) and our intellectual functions (including consciousness and emotions) are regarded as emergent properties arising from complex organizations of matter that are obeying physico-chemical laws. In fact, the very origins of life on earth are understood on those physico-chemical terms. The code that enables biological properties to arise from physico-chemical foundations resides in the organism's genes and it is by way of this stored information that our genes are considered to hold the key to the secrets of life.

As human beings, we are also regarded to have evolved from "lower" levels of organisms through the processes of genetic variation and natural selection. From a philosophical perspective, Darwin's theory of evolution delivered a fatal blow to teleological concepts of human nature such as man being divinely created and having thus a unique purpose.[3] Coupled with the Copernican Revolution (demonstrating that our earth was not at the centre of the universe), Darwin's theory further deepened man's existential sense of estrangement: despite all the seeming superiority of a consciously developing civilization in relation to everything else around him, brute scientific facts were relentlessly revealing that there was nothing to indicate that the human race held a privileged position on earth or in the universe.

In brief, we are genetically determined organisms, physico-chemically constituted in essence with no evidence showing us to be specially created. Our distinctive features lie in our abilities to make use of our reasoning powers (the philosophy of rationalism) and our experiences, in particular our sense-based experiences (the philosophy of empiricism). Whether our reasoning powers are more important than our sense-based experiences (or the converse) for the build-up of useful knowledge has

[3] D. Palmer, *Visions of Human Nature: an Introduction*, p. 184-185

been the subject matter of many centuries of debate and is still unresolved.[4] On a pragmatic note, humanity's scientific advancements are often thought to rest on both these abilities. In refreshing contrast to rationalism and empiricism, a contemporary development in philosophy has been the increasing interest shown in the emotional dimension of human nature and the very important role emotions play in not only causing, but also resolving, fundamental human dilemmas.[5, 6]

Apart from the bio-genetic perspective, the discipline of psychology views human nature to be significantly influenced by emotional experiences (especially during childhood) and it also teaches that many emotional conflicts remain within the subconscious realm of man and man is often unaware of his true self or true motivations. Another quasi-psychological model of human nature is that employed in mainstream economic theories. The archetypical economic man is always expected to rationally maximize his utility, where utility is defined in terms of satisfaction of deeply ingrained (and thus essentially unalterable) self-interests. In recent times, economists themselves have increasingly questioned the assumptions underlying such conceptions of man.[7]

Another viewpoint of human nature is defined in terms of the mutual relationship between the individual and society. A communitarian perspective sees the essence of human beings as being fundamentally social in nature, highlighting not only the interdependence of human beings but also how the highest fulfilment of that nature resides in leading virtuous relationships with one another. A version of this perspective is also seen in Marxism, which in fact denies the independent existence of an entity such as human nature: rather, the essence of human beings resides in their relationships with each other and what influences these relationships are the economic modes of production practised by societies.

In a communitarian reading of the human condition, the needs of society or others can be deemed to have priority over the needs of self (society before self). This viewpoint, historically articulated in largely secular

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[4] R. Trigg, *Ideas of Human Nature –An Historical Introduction*, p. 79-108
[5] R. de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotions*, p. 1-20
[6] M. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought – the Intelligence of Emotions*, p. 1-16
[7] A. Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, p 1-28

tones by Aristotle,[8] has been virtually replaced in modern times by a much more individualized conception of the self, where fulfilment is defined in terms of goals and aspiration that the individual sets for himself; in this self-before-society perspective, society becomes a mere aggregation of numerous individual selves who often have competing interests and independent rights.

Finally, the very existence of human nature is increasingly questioned these days with the post-modernist assault on epistemological pursuits. Their emphasis on the relativity and context of all knowledge leads to marked difficulties in defining or describing any form of universal human nature.

What is our purpose? What are our values?

Many have written about a feeling of cosmic alienation in relation to the above scientific and materialistic perspectives of man. That sense of alienation also makes us aware of another dimension of the human condition, the unstoppable quest man intrinsically has to discover the meaning of his existence.[9] Regardless of the reality of this need, secular philosophy is nevertheless, committed to the positivist demand to confine itself to verifiable facts and not fall into the so-called naturalistic fallacy – the deriving of an "ought" from an "is".

However, since strict avoidance of the naturalistic fallacy is impossible (in terms of the need to practically lead our lives), restricted purposes and values have entered into secularism, but with the understanding that these norms and guidelines are intuitively derived and logically coherent with the secular (materially-based) perspectives of human nature. Thus the standard appreciation of the purpose of human life is that of happiness: one lives in order to be happy and the standard bases of that earthly-based happiness have remained remarkably constant over the centuries from as early as Aristotle's observations on humanity's common yearnings: physical pleasure, wealth and social approval or fame.[10]

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[8] J. Lear, *Aristotle – the Desire to Understand*, pp. 152 – 208.
[9] L. Kolakowski, *Metaphysical Horror*, pp. 29-35
[10] GJ. Hughes, *Aristotle on Ethics*, p. 24

An important pre-requisite for the individual's pursuit of these aims towards his or her happiness is that of freedom (and the related concept of rights): the individual must have among other liberties, the freedom of choice in deciding the direction and manner of that pursuit (within, of course, the legal limits of society). Thus, in terms of how society should be structured and function so as to promote the well-being of its citizens, the ideals of freedom and the rights of every citizen have come to be deeply cherished. Also highly valued at this level is the concept of equality, in particular the equality of opportunities for each one to pursue his chosen pathway to happiness.

It is recognized that there is an inescapable element of self-centredness in the above way of defining life's purpose and this self-centredness often collides with the needs of the wider social group. The modern outlook, however, does not look at such self-centredness as being bad per se – in fact, as human beings we cannot but be selfish, given our evolutionary experiences of jungle laws and survival of the fittest. What is needed therefore, to additionally meet the needs of society, is to rationally tutor the crude form of self-centredness to a more enlightened form that recognizes the longer-term benefits (to oneself, of course) of everyone striving to uphold ethical codes of behaviour.

This leads then to an extremely high premium paid by modern man for the instrumental use of reason. Thus at the level of the individual, reason will guide the individual in determining his specific means towards achieving happiness, while considering also the needs of others. At the level of society, reason, via the natural sciences, enables continuous material progress and through the social sciences, brings about ever improving developments in fields such as economics, politics and law; the ends and means of social development can be supported by unaided reason alone.[11] It can likewise develop ethical codes on a purely rational basis, avoiding in this manner, all the historical problems arising from religion (the past source of humanity's ethical laws). In brief, this faith in the benefits of unaided reason towards man's happiness at both the individual and social level, reflects a humanistic ideal that mankind has set for itself, especially from the times of the Enlightenment in Europe.

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[11] A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 32-53

As to the significance of death and what comes thereafter, the materialistic perspective is stoically, but coherently, silent. There is no objective, scientific knowledge that gives answers in this area and man must accept the brute fact that this strange and estranged life is all that we have, to best achieve the materially-defined goal of happiness (pleasure, wealth and fame).

The Marxists, existentialists and post modernists hold onto different answers to questions about life's purposes and values. The Marxists (and other Communists) will point out that the above conception of man's self-centredness is artificial, an induced, secondary reality arising from the crowded and manipulated environment designed by inordinately wealthy capitalists. For Marx too, the aim in life is happiness but a happiness that arises from mutual cooperation and a caring social environment which human beings are naturally capable of creating. The secular existentialists, on the other hand, totally deny that human beings can ever be happy. They see no roads to salvation (material or metaphysical) and recommend that we must first recognize the fundamental and universal truth of anguish that is at the core of our existence. For the post-modernists, there are no all-embracing foundational truths that can encompass the diverse cultures and mindsets constitutive of the human race. They decry the illusion of universality in any recommendations for the norms of living; truth, for the post-modernist, is not absolute, but always relative, in the contexts of both space and time.[12]

B) The World Around Us

One common theme amongst all the materialist perspectives of the human condition is the true and unquestioned reality of the world and universe around us. This world is physically real as we ourselves are and there are no other realities to talk of. Scientists believe that the universe originated from a gigantic explosion leading to a phase of expansion, and which, in time to come, will revert, concluding eventually to total collapse in itself. Further fundamental questions regarding the origin of this origin have no answers (at least presently) and from a pragmatic point of view such questions are regarded as unimportant for individual human beings, whose basic objective is to be engaged with this real world and its people in an

[12] Z. Bauman, *Post-modern Ethics*, p.12

instrumental manner so as to bring about one's own materially-based happiness during his or her life span.

C) Diagnosis Of Our Maladies

The materialist man fundamentally seeks pleasure, wealth and recognition so as to attain happiness – the logical end-point or purpose of a purely earth-bound existence. To realize them, he or she also wants or needs the essential and relevant freedoms and equality of opportunities. Of course, if social questions arise, he or she may also say that such a realization of goals should preferably take place in a caring and loving society. Many obstacles however stand in the way towards the attainment of happiness conceptualised in this manner and it will be instructive to list them in this section.

Individual level

To begin with, there is the question of means (for achieving happiness) and, in particular, the unequal distribution of these means in society. Even when freedom of opportunities can be guaranteed constitutionally, the *antecedent* inequalities that Sen talks of, either in external circumstances (such as inherited fortunes or the social environment that we are born into) and/or personal characteristics (such as health status, physical and mental abilities) cannot thus assure that the final happiness will be equally achieved by all. [13] Even when there is antecedent equality (with the full understanding that such an assumption is unrealistic), two individuals from a similar background still will not have equal chances of attaining happiness, given also the *on-going* dissimilarity of external factors that can interfere with each of their pursuits. Furthermore, even when happiness is finally attained, there is still no subsequent assurance that all the combination of variables responsible for the success will remain the same thereafter so as to maintain that happiness. Even if (most improbably) one has the ability to significantly control and keep constant those external variables, one's internal variables will still alter (changing health, ageing etc). Happiness, in other words, is totally elusive and it is intrinsic to life that the contingencies of changes and chances are always operational and they can directly frustrate man's desire for pleasure, wealth or recognition.

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[13] A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined,* pp.1-11

The materialist perspective will also acknowledge that the inability to talk of any matter after death renders a serious absurdity to whatever imperfect struggles individuals have to experience as they live out their lives.[14] This meaninglessness is compounded many times over when the striving towards happiness is further thwarted by such factors as described above. Scientific materialism has no answers to this fundamental ontological meaninglessness, which existentialism also focuses upon. Existential philosophy additionally states that it is our unwillingness to appreciate the stark reality that we can never ever be happy (by finding a meaning external to ourselves) and our inability to cope with the radical freedom of choice and action that have been thrust upon us (consequent to the eclipse of God in our civilization) which contribute to modern man's malady.

Beyond this existential *angst*, the discipline of psychology focuses upon the emotional conflicts which all of us, to varying degrees, experience as a result of our growing up and living with others; moreover, often enough these conflicts are operating at the subconscious level creating distortions of perception, as well as repressions. As the saying goes, "even in his own house, man is not the master".

The post-modernists analyse the human dilemma to be stemming from mistaken modernist pretensions about the universability and foundational nature of rationality; they see the lack of context-sensitivity in the understanding and application of logically derived conclusions (especially in the realm of values) to be the source of divisiveness and unhappiness for mankind.

Societal level

Another inescapable fact of human life is that it is fundamentally social in nature: that is, man characteristically lives in groups and this creates certain tensions between the needs of the individual vis-à-vis the needs of the group. Psychologically, man wants to be a member of a loving community, but it soon becomes clear that for the creation of such a loving community, individuals must be ready to forgo certain manners of pursuit, and thus attainment, of happiness. In other words, individuals will have to sacrifice some of their wishes and interests for the sake of unity in the community they are living in. Some philosophers consider this

[14] E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 268-269

dilemma between the individuals' needs and society's needs to be an *aporia* – a conflict that cannot be resolved.[15] The primary reason is that all secular attempts to develop an ethics of caring run into the difficulties of moral relativity as well as result in the weak type of ethical commitments that Sen has described.[16]

From another viewpoint, the basic social problem can be described to be that of disunity stemming from two contemporary realities that none of us can run away from: the desire for autonomy and the existence of social plurality.[17] These realities thwart communitarian aspirations towards shared understanding of the common good to be effected by social institutions. Liberal individualism has deep distrust of all attempts to work out communal standards. Authority, within such a perspective, is likened to authoritarianism, and in rejecting authority, moral education is undermined. [18] This leads to, for individuals, more perplexing and difficult choices about lifestyles and, for societies, an associated, deep-rooted divisiveness and instability.

For Marxists, the fundamental cause of man's malady lies in the distorted relationship between man and man, arising from the capitalist mode of economic production. This brand of economic lifestyle which all of us in capitalist societies are exposed to and thus inevitably imbibe, enforces upon us a vision wherein we are encouraged to see our fellow human beings as a means for our own materialistic gain. The starting point for Marxists is for us to acknowledge this impoverished and unfortunate position that we are all in, and then to overthrow the capitalist regime and replace it with a communist mode of economic production. While Marxism has now been largely discredited, it is openly recognized that the free market economic model has many serious limitations (including widening income inequalities, inability to control the "externalities" of economic pursuits such as environmental damage or the "corrosion of character")[19, 20]

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[15] Z. Bauman, *Post-modern ethics*, p.12
[16] A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, p. 270
[17] W. Kymlicka, *Community, In: A Companion to Contemporary Political Philosophy*, p.376
[18] E. Kennedy, *Introduction, In: Simon YR. Freedom and Community*, p. xii-xv.
[19] R. Heilbroner, *21st Century Capitalism*, pp. 109-117

Spiritual Maladies

While the scientific materialistic perspective recognizes some of the above limitations of its admittedly diverse understanding of, and approach towards, human happiness, it is also keen to point out the limitations of its primary contender – religion. The main problem with religion is its non-verifiability scientifically and the inability of its various doctrines to stand up to the rigors of rationality. Since reason is traditionally considered to play no role in matters of faith and because faith rests so heavily on emotions, the danger of fanaticism can, and have, easily occurred with countless destruction and persecutions committed in the name of God. Furthermore, religion has been markedly oppressive, with its institutions giving no freedom for individual believers to interpret scripture or choose their lifestyles. In fact, one reason why many people are so much freer today is due to the decline of religion - freedom not just in the domain of physical liberties but also in the intellectual realm where man is not constrained to question or imagine. Thus one fundamental basis for justifying the secular approach to understanding the human condition stems from the need to avoid the dangers of the religious alternative.

D) Prescription For Our Maladies

The materialist prescription for happiness is always a partial one (though this often goes unrecognised or is insufficiently acknowledged). The incompleteness of the prescription is related mainly to the brute fact that man can never fully control all the contingencies in life, including its absurdities and terrors.[21] Nevertheless, the popular belief is that man is rationally capable of deriving the ultimate solutions to his or her dilemmas and difficulties and what is vitally needed is more and more objective knowledge in all areas of our lives. In that spirit therefore, the successes of science hold a great promise for humanity because scientific discoveries enable man to have a real and rational control over many significant aspects of his external environment. Antecedent inequalities and on-going fluxes in external circumstances which obtrude and frustrate man's pursuit of happiness (as mentioned above) can be better attenuated, enabling even more people to successfully attain their chosen goals of

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[20] R. Sennett, *The Corrosion of Character – the Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, pp. 136-148

[21] E. Becker, *The Denial of Death*, pp. 283-284.

happiness. In brief, scientific breakthroughs provide the solutions to our problems and they also empower more individuals to attain higher levels of independence and capabilities.

This belief is not only based on the natural and biological sciences helping in various physical ways (such as health, reduction of toil, quality of shelter, communication and transportation) but also on evolving knowledge in the social sciences. These latter fields (such as economics, political science, and sociology) have, as examples, developed more reliable strategies for economic development, promoted the democratic ideals of governance, defined and upheld human rights and operationalised the practice of procedural and distributive elements of social justice. In all these matters of progress, the belief is the same: that through the use of reason and the empirical, scientific method, it will be possible for us to work out technical solutions for achieving happiness.

This conviction (and some would use the term, faith) also extends to the domain of ethics. It is well recognized that the moral realm has to often accompany the above-mentioned technical solutions so that the latter can be appropriately implemented. Discarding religion, however, there has always been the conviction that man's rational faculty alone will be able to derive the fundamental principles of ethics, which will indicate the necessary steps that man has to take in his various dealings with fellow human beings. Utilitarianism and deontological ethics are often-quoted examples of such secular ethical systems - even if some of their founding fathers (John Stuart Mill and Immanuel Kant) themselves were theists.[22] Another secular endeavour to advance the ethical realm is through the study and critical discussion of the humanities.[23, 24] Still others believe that a minimal set of universal behavioural norms can quite simply be derived through the use of reason.[25] What can also be noted in all these secular approaches is that the primary benefit of ethics is seen to be operating at the level of society. The benefit of virtues at the level of individuals is only indirect, in that a more united society – the product of ethical behaviour – will also be conducive to more successful strivings for

[22] AF. Holmes, *Fact, Value and God,* pp. 118-130 and 144-159
[23] M. Nussbaum, *Poetic Justice – the Literary Imagination and Public Life,* pp. 1-12
[24] WC. Booth, *The Company We Keep – An Ethics of Fiction,* pp. 483-489
[25] S. Bok, *Common Values,* pp. 13-19

happiness for its members. In other words, virtuous behaviour is valued instrumentally rather than intrinsically.

Marxists believe, however, that the solution is in the change of socio-economic practices and not just in the advancement of science and technology. Specifically, the capitalist mode of economic practice has to be discarded and socialism, followed eventually by communism, be put in place, before the benefits of science can truly be experienced by all humanity. However, with the near demise of Communism in our present era, many economists are convinced that market economy will play a pivotal role in advancing the material prosperity of humanity, albeit moderated by the need for more governmental regulations and interventions.[26, 27, 28]

Psychologists emphasise the importance of self-awareness as well as psychotherapeutic methods of self-integration so as to empower individuals towards growth. Though the process can be painful at times, this path eventually leads to a happier life. Existentialists in turn claim that the true path to authenticity (and happiness) resides in the correct understanding and practice of freedom, even if the specifics of that understanding and practice are often not spelled out. Post-modernists point towards the importance always of being mindful of the role of context (such as that of history or culture) and the moving away from universalistic or foundational types of prejudiced thinking.

It can be seen from the above that scientific materialism does harbour optimistic viewpoints about the perfectibility of both human nature as well as the human condition through its distinctive methods of observation and verification. The nature of that perfectibility varies in accordance with the specific doctrine that one is espousing. Thus from the perspective of biology being the root determinant of human nature, perfectibility essentially resides in the methods of genetic engineering. From the psychological point of view, perfectibility comes about via psychotherapy and self-integration. For those who believe that forces of society essentially mould human nature, perfectibility of the human

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[26] A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, pp. 127-129
[27] R. Heilbroner, *21st Century Capitalism*, pp 134-142
[28] JK. Galbraith, *The Good Society – the Humane Agenda*, pp. 75-81

condition can only be brought about by improvements in the structures and functions of social institutions. Needless to say, many of these perfectibility-related approaches are not mutually exclusive and are thus pursued concurrently.

For those who are aware, nevertheless, of the current inadequacies and incompleteness of the scientific promise for the attainment of happiness, the only logical conclusion is that these limitations reflect the need to have even more objective knowledge, more technical discoveries and possibly also, methodological breakthroughs. Thus, as more scientists are becoming increasingly critical of the reductionist approach of science that potentially lends itself to narrowed and even prejudiced perspectives (clearly illustrated in the current day example of genetic determinism)[29,30], proposals are being made for attitudinal and philosophical shifts that can produce more useful information.[31]

Spiritual Perspective

One fundamental feature of the spiritual perspective is its emphasis that the true, ultimate reality of existence does not reside in this earthly sphere but is instead located elsewhere – beyond the reach of our senses and our intellect. What also needs to be appreciated at the outset about this perspective are two other characteristics: firstly, that it differs from the philosophy of idealism because the spiritual vision does not deny the reality of this earthly life (the way idealism denies it) but only says that the *ultimate* reality is in another dimension; and secondly, the closely related point (given the acceptance of earthly reality) that the spiritual perspective always demands a commitment to continually improve humanity's existence in a spirit of service through scientific advances and moral excellence. In essence, what religion wants is for man to be in love with God and yet to remain engaged with this world so as to promote its unity through individual efforts of compassion and collective efforts of science and justice. This worldview is much more nuanced and

[29] R.C. Lewontin, *The Doctrine of DNA – Biology as Ideology*, pp. 19-37
[30] E.F. Keller, *The Century of the Gene*, pp. 5-8
[31] R. C. Lewontin, *The Triple Helix – Gene, Organism and Environment*, pp. 109-129

multifaceted than is often described and a concise summary is attempted below, along the same categories as given for the secular perspective.

However, before describing further the religious perspective, a preliminary question needs answering and that is, how does one establish or know the truth of religion. For present purposes, only a brief answer to this vital question is possible (a lengthier explanation, in the context of humanity's moral endeavours, has been given elsewhere).[32] Essentially the Bahá'í Writings claim that direct apprehension of God is impossible for us as human beings, and that the only recourse we have in knowing the truth of religion is by knowing the truth of the Prophet or the Messenger of God. This route, (which requires both faith as well as rationality) is far more accessible to us since the Prophet was, at a certain time in history, living amongst humanity. The seeker is encouraged to get to know the life history of the Prophet and to peruse, without any bias, the revealed Word of God uttered by the Prophet. A promise made by religion is that if such a search is sincerely done, the seeker will be able to arrive at a conclusion about the truth of the Messenger and thus, the truth of God.

The subsequent description of the spiritual perspective assumes an acceptance of its central validity. In the discussion below of the religious paradigm, the specific concepts are all from the Bahá'í Faith, and while the particularities of these concepts may appear to differ from some of the other major religions, it is assumed, in the manner of Ward,[33] that at a general enough level of analysis, what various religions say about the human condition can be deemed to be similar. This position is also in keeping with one of the Bahá'í Faith's central principles, that in essence, all religions are one.

A) Human Nature

Who are we? What are we?

The Bahá'í Writings refer to three degrees of reality with reference to humanity.[34] There is firstly the realm of the body – this is the physical or material realm incorporating the faculties of the senses and which man shares with animals. Unlike animals however, man also possesses a soul,

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[32] S. Sahadevan, "The Missing Moral Dimension", *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review*, Vol. 4, 1999, pp. 33-54.

[33] K. Ward, *Religion and Human Nature*, p.324.

[34] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 96-99

the second reality of man and his truly defining characteristic. The soul is regarded as a sign of God and its essence a mystery that none can comprehend. Finally, there is the realm of the energizing Spirit which is regarded as emanating from the Kingdom of God and which becomes man's reality when his soul turns towards God.

Who we truly are in actuality (that is, in contrast to our potentiality) depends on how our souls are orientated.[35] If our souls are orientated away from God and towards the bodily realm, then the material qualities in the soul will gain ascendancy and our lives will be largely defined in, and limited to, the offerings of the senses and the material world. This materialist orientation is regarded as a limitation in that in so far as the soul's true state of happiness is concerned, it is the spiritual connection with God that the soul actually needs.[36] Thus when our souls are freely and lovingly (and these conditionals are vital) turned towards God and the realm of the spirit, the soul begins to experience the love of God and thus develop and strengthen its spiritual qualities, manifesting features such as selflessness, compassion and radiance in its interactions with the material world. The basis and manner of the soul's turning towards God are discussed further below.

While the Bahá'í Writings do not equate man's soul with God, the signs of God are described to be potentially residing within man's soul, just as they also are residing within the world.[37] The soul, while it has a beginning (at conception) is regarded as having no end and it is this immortality of the soul that enables the religious paradigm to talk of how "life" continues after death. The dimensions and nature of the post-earthly existence are unknown, but its central feature is that of the soul's ever-continuing growth and approach towards God.[38] In this context, heaven and hell are not to be understood as fixed locations for permanent residence, but rather as metaphors referring to the state of the soul – when turned toward God and experiencing His bliss, that soul is experiencing heaven (and this can occur even in our present life); conversely, when the soul is turned away from God and experiencing the passions of the self,

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[35] *ibid*
[36] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.185
[37] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.178
[38] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.66

that underlying (even if unrecognized) agitation, disquiet and remoteness is referred to as hell.[39]

The presence of the soul and its afore-mentioned characteristics were an established and well-accepted part of the worldview in various civilisations of the past but from around the period of Enlightenment, many modernising, westernised societies witnessed the gradual but sure "death of the soul".[40] By itself, the spiritual perspective on human nature does not contradict many of the scientific discoveries relating to man, however, it would reject theories such as those of genetic determinism and the origin of humanity from primates. The human species, while it has passed from "condition to condition, from form to form, from one shape to another", is deemed to always have been, from the beginning, distinct from the animals[41] and its distinctiveness and defining potential resides in its rational soul[42] and not its genes.

The most important power of the soul is its rationality; unlike Hume, religion views man's reason to be potentially superior to his passions. Reason therefore empowers man not only towards scientific discoveries but contributes towards wisdom in the moral and spiritual realm. Human emotions are recognized to be important and the cultivation of positive emotions (such as compassion) and avoidance of negative emotions (such as anger, envy, lust) are stressed. Man's nature is always perfectible and the positive transformation of his inner, psychological make-up resides in the master emotion of the love of God, a love that re-orders as well as inspires man to make the necessary sacrifices to spiritually grow.[43] Without the knowledge and love of God, all forms of psychotherapy will only possess sub-optimal effectiveness to bring about personal integration and growth. The capacities of the soul to reflect the attributes of God are infinite, and these capacities are always growing; the soul's traits are thus never fixed but always progressive with the love of God.

While religion recognizes the reality of social forces on human beings, it ultimately views individuals to be prior to society – the individual always

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[39] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh,* pp. 189, 118
[40] W. Barret, *Death of The Soul,* pp. 3-10
[41] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions,* pp. 183-184
[42] *ibid,* p.208
[43] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace,* p.452

has the potential capacity to decide for himself and herself how his or her life should be lived no matter what the sociological demands or constraints are. Thus the structures and functioning of social institutions are not seen to be the determining factors behind the individual's choices and preferences; the potential for man, at any time, to be free of such influences – through an inspiration borne of the love of God – is always emphasized by religion. That which is ultimately deterministic for the individual is the nature of his or her freely chosen relationship with God.

What is our purpose? What are our values?

Unlike the secular paradigm, which is largely silent on this subject matter because of its positivist commitments and fears of naturalistic fallacies, the spiritual perspective makes several important claims here. Our purpose in life is to know God and love God[44] and this also translates to attainment of virtues[45] and acquisition of a saintly character.[46] The fulfilment of this purpose is by way of sincere service towards others and working for the betterment of the world[47] as well by promoting unity and concord amongst people.[48] While happiness is acknowledged as an important objective in life, it is spiritual happiness (in contrast to material happiness) that receives focus and which is realized through the fulfilment of our God-assigned purposes. Thus, from the spiritual viewpoint, virtues, in addition to their instrumental benefits to society, have also an intrinsic value for individuals, in terms of their impact on the souls' growth and development. In this teleological conception of mankind, Aristotle's virtue ethics is very similar to the religious perspective. In fact, Aristotle had also emphasized the connection between man's intrinsically valued virtues and his contemplation and service to God,[49] but it is a connection that is insufficiently and infrequently acknowledged in many of the modern secular descriptions of Aristotelian ethics.

The above manner of specifying spiritual happiness in terms of service and selflessness resolves the conflict or *aporia* that exists in the secular paradigm between the individual's wants and the needs of society. The

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[44] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.65
[45] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.4
[46] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.299
[47] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 184
[48] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.235.
[49] A. Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life*, pp. 86-112.

way the spiritual individual is orientated, in terms of his or her life's purpose and values, is such that the needs of society are also the needs of the individual. The individual's raison d'etre is the service that he or she can offer to others in society. In the secular world the social sciences are still looking for a theory that can resolve the *aporia* mentioned above, since secular perspectives deem self-centredness to be rational, and hence cannot inspire the lasting and consistent practice of sacrifice, a trait long recognized to be vital for the continued well-being of society. [50] In this context, the spiritual paradigm would disagree with the conventional economic picture of man as a rational (meaning self-centred) maximiser of utility or preferences. Religion will not equate rationality with self-centredness and conversely, it does not at all see selflessness as an irrational trait. Such diametrically opposed conceptions, between the secular and the spiritual, of what it means to be rational, arise in part because the secular vision of happiness is totally restricted to man's physical lifespan, whereas the spiritual vision of happiness is not time-bound.

The highest value cherished in the religious perspective is the love of God,[51] inspired by the knowledge and beauty of God, and which enables a powerful multi-levelled vision of oneness – oneness of God, oneness of religions and oneness of mankind. At the individual level, love of God is valued for its transformative power, while at the societal level, it is regarded as the greatest power that can embrace the essential diversity in humanity – be it in opinions, thoughts, intelligence or sentiments – by not allowing these differences to become divisive.[52] In essence, love of God – *in its proper form* as a mature and discerning state of emotion – promotes unity in diversity and becomes religion's answer to the dilemmas of moral relativity seen in our highly (some would say, overly) intellectual post-modern era. Like all love, this love of God must come from within us freely, and in that spirit of freedom, we must – as a vital constituent of that love – trust God and submit to Him and His Will, always recognizing that "He doeth whatsoever He willeth".[53] It is in this sense that man's freedom and its seeming opposite, submission, are extremely important concepts in religion. In submitting to God, man also experiences humility,

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[50] R. Trigg, *Understanding Social Science*, pp. 132-154.
[51] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 261.
[52] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 301, 305
[53] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.51

a vital trait for engendering love and unity in society. In the spirit of our love of God, we are to be compassionate toward others and to overlook their faults for the sake of God (*not* for the sake of others).[54, 55] Also, it is through the love of God that the believer derives the needed sustenance to be positively engaged with the world, and promote its unity in a spirit of service to others. In essence, we observe all the commandments of God for the love of His beauty.[56]

Just as love of God inspires man to be committed to this world and to work towards its betterment, it also asks man, in another seeming paradox, to be detached from all earthly influences except Him.[57] This means not to be attached or dependent on anyone or anything. The list under "anything" is diverse, including physical pleasure, wealth, power and social recognition (in all its gross and more subtle forms) as well as the rewards of heaven.[58] Detachment is not an easy concept to comprehend or put into practice, especially when it is juxtaposed with the other spiritual injunction to be engaged lovingly with the world. In fact, only when religion's call for detachment is founded upon the individual's proper love of God, can such a lifestyle remain psychologically sound and not lead to unhealthy states of aloofness. The logical paradox of being committed to the world as well as being detached from it melts away in practice when virtuous deeds are being performed with no expectations or thoughts of rewards or recognition. The deed itself becomes its own reward, inspired by the love of God[59], reflecting thus religion's wish to see purity of motive and sincerity of will to be driving all actions.

Rationality, freedom and equality are all highly valued in the spiritual paradigm, but the Bahá'í Writings would clarify that their value is secondary to, and to be derived from, the love of God and the attendant spiritual perception of oneness. Thus while the rational faculty of the soul is considered to be its highest power, the contributions of this faculty become most useful when, to begin with, it is inspired by the love of God to be of service to mankind. A related point is that spiritually defined

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[54] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace,* p.93
[55] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 315
[56] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 332
[57] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh,* p. 328
[58] A. Taherzadeh, *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh,* p.20
[59] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh,* p.189

purposes and values are not antagonistic towards scientific values in pursuing truth. In fact acquisition of scientific (and artistic) knowledge is strongly encouraged so that the well-being of mankind can be promoted. Pursuit of truth by the scientific mode and the religious mode is deemed complementary and both branches of knowledge are needed for harmonious living.[60] There is thus no naturalistic fallacy to talk of, because the "ought" was never, in the first place, meant to be derived from the "is" – both are vital and religion is the source of all "oughts" and needed values.

The highest ideal religion envisions for society is its unity, a unity founded upon the spiritual recognition of the oneness of mankind, a recognition that requires for its sustenance, the love of God. In fact, Bahá'u'lláh states, "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless its unity is firmly established."[61] In our era, this unity is to be fully appreciated at a global level (and not just nationally), taking care at the same time to preserve its rich, valid diversity.[62] The highest social virtue is identified to be justice and its purpose is to promote the unity of mankind.[63, 64] In this context, society must also enshrine freedom for its citizens; however, in the vocabulary of Rawls' well-accepted theory of justice (as quoted by Wolff[65]), the principle of the oneness of mankind (founded upon the love of God), within the religious approach, has lexical priority over the principle of liberty. Only when such spiritually understood values of oneness and justice are subsequently brought onto policy areas such as socio-economic development, education and environmental stewardship, can true and lasting collective progress be experienced by humanity.[66, 67]

Equality is another deeply cherished social value but as Sen has pointed out, striving for equality in one space or variable will necessarily have to lead to inequality in other spaces.[68] Likewise, the Bahá'í Writings agree

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[60] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 141-146
[61] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.286
[62] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp.290-292
[63] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.67
[64] Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pp.28-30, 32
[65] J. Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, pp.174-175
[66] Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp.42-44
[67] Bahá'í International Community, *Valuing Spirituality in Development*, pp.14-24
[68] A. Sen, *Inequality Re-examined*, pp.18-19

that complete inequality is impracticable and indeed a chimera; in fact inequality in degree and capacity is an intrinsic property of nature and necessarily, there will be rich as well as poor people.[69] The central principle governing this matter is not one of equality but instead, the spiritual oneness of mankind, a oneness characterized by our creation from the one same God and by our common spiritual capacities to care for one another unitedly.[70] With this understanding of oneness, borne from the love of God, the rich themselves will *voluntarily* share their wealth and participate in social and economic readjustments so that extremes of wealth and poverty are eliminated.[71]

B) The World Around Us

As mentioned above, the religious perspective does not deny the reality of the world we live in, even while it emphasizes that the Ultimate Reality for all of us is elsewhere. Religion, unlike the fears of many who have advanced psychosocial explanations for the origin of religion,[72] is fully and squarely aware of the real problems of the world and, in fact, demands that the problems be faced and resolved by all, without prejudice and illusion. In other words, the spiritual perspective requires a commitment to improving the conditions of this world (even when for each believer the earthly existence is only a transitory one), and states that to take on this task, one must have both spiritual and scientific knowledge.[73, 74] Our spiritual growth in this earthly existence comes about not by busying ourselves in our own concerns, but through rehabilitating the fortunes of mankind.[75]

C) Diagnosis of Our Maladies

Individual level

The religious paradigm roots out the chief cause of man's anguish and unhappiness of his turning away from God and not experiencing the love of God. In such a state man is left without an inner compass, making it

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[69] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 151-152
[70] Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words (Arabic), No. 68*, p. 28
[71] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 30
[72] J. Thrower, *Religion: The Classical Theories*, pp. 126-201
[73] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 62-64
[74] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.51
[75] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 86

difficult for him to define a self-transcendent purpose in his life; religion points to a rather simple psychological truth that self-confined and self-centred life purposes cannot evince long-lasting meaning to the individual. Moreover, man is always plagued by the approach of death, and the subsequent void after that. He is continually aware that whatever happiness he has, is always in a precarious state of existence – at any time, major fluxes (internal or external) can arise, wiping out all that he had worked for, or been fortunate to have. He can only hope that he will not be the unlucky one. He lacks the overall picture which religion provides – a picture depicting purpose and meaning in both this earthly existence and beyond – that inspires a more assured and accepting response towards the changes and chances of life, including aloneness and death. Without the spiritual paradigm, he needs immense courage – which, in its healthy form, is rare – and the overwhelming majority of people escape by either not thinking of these existential matters or distract themselves continually through innumerable avenues that they and their societies create.

Religion recognizes the importance of acquiring wealth – as long as that wealth does not become an end in itself and man does not become attached to it, but uses it also for the welfare of society.[76,77] Religion decries the folly of pursuing fame, power and pleasure, as these endpoints are transitory, pertaining only to this earthly existence and moreover, inimical to the capabilities that are truly needed in the bigger picture of growing towards God, by way of selflessness and service.[78] Earthly pursuits and attachments inevitably lead to a self-centred lifestyle that does not bring true peace to the soul and constricts its vision and potential.

Religion's responses to the insights of psychology, existentialism and post-modernism regarding mankind's malaise are mixed. Thus, while it may have no objections to psychology's claims that man has many inner conflicts and tensions that he is unaware of or does not want to be aware of, that he gets by with games of self-deception and illusions, religion may want to add that even when man takes the painful first steps of knowing himself, those steps must be thorough enough so as to lead him

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[76] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 276
[77] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp.24-25
[78] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp 138-139

to the knowledge of God. In fact, the spiritual model does regard the true knowledge of self to be akin to knowledge of God.[79] Likewise the religious perspective may have no objections with the existentialist's observation of how man is in anguish because he does not know how to make use of his radical freedom. However, religion will state that absolute freedom was not meant for man, but rather, man was given freedom so that he can freely submit himself, with love, to God. Paradoxical as it may seem (and there are many "paradoxes" in religion), it is in this submission to God that man begins to experience the truest form of liberty.[80]

While religion will agree with the important avoidance of prejudices that post-modernism often alludes to (in their emphasis on retaining historical or cultural context in all claims of knowledge), as well as with the relativity of all truth (such as scientific truth and the social dimension of religious truth) in that these verities are always progressively being revealed, nevertheless, for the period associated with each revelation, religion would regard its truths to be both universalistic and foundational (concepts that post-modernism is antagonistic towards). In fact, the spiritual laws of religion (as opposed to its social laws) are deemed to be additionally valid across all time (past and future).[81] In this sense, in terms of the core spiritual injunctions, religion would be opposed to any suggestions of moral relativity. As mentioned above, its answer to humanity's need for a dominating sentiment that can still unify a widely diverse mankind is the love of God that "brings the different people under the shadow of the tent of affection".[82] Love of God is of fundamental relevance to all mankind, at all times.[83]

Societal level

While it is recognized that the positivist attitude in science is presently not as prominent as before, there is still a general inclination in many developed parts of the world to focus upon and believe only that which is empirically verifiable and that which is quantifiable. The development and inculcation of many socio-economic policies arise from such convictions. Spiritual faith is regarded to be a very poor source of sound

[79] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings,* pp.178, 326
[80] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings,* pp.335-336
[81] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace,* pp 364-366
[82] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions,* p.301
[83] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks,* pp.82-83

knowledge. Religion would view this ubiquitous social fascination with the scientific-alone mode of acquiring knowledge to be an impoverishing trait, depriving mankind of a far richer and more complete state of awareness and being. Likewise, it would also point to how social policies that are largely calculative and utilitarian, impair relationships and ties of affection between fellow citizens. Neither, it should be noted, is such positivist leaning defensible in the first place: it is an illusion to believe that in the scientific domain there are no traces of faith. In fact, the very opposite is true when one realizes that the foundational blocks of the scientific enterprise are resting on faith (such as faith in the lawfulness of nature and finite causation[84]). Science cannot advance without such premises or acts of faith and neither can any individual function if no assumptions are ever going to be sensibly made in his or her daily life. In other words, there is nothing in principle false or wrong about the practice of faith. Faith is operational everywhere in our lives, inside as well as outside religion. Clinging onto a philosophy where only empirically verifiable facts can be trusted prevents humanity from further developing their abilities in the areas of wisdom and sensible judgement, both at the individual as well as the collective level. An openness of mind is called for that recognizes the limits of measurable approaches in our everyday concerns, but one which still retains a quiet certitude that within us we have the capabilities to wisely judge aright those important but non-quantifiable problems that continually face humanity. Religion would emphasize however, that these capabilities are fundamentally spiritual in nature.

The diversity of mankind and its plurality of viewpoints becomes a problem for social cohesion when each individual insists upon his freedoms and his rights, especially the right to hold onto his viewpoints as well as to pursue the chosen ends of those viewpoints. Religion, which immensely values freedom for the individual man (after all, for man to love God, the first step of turning towards God must be freely made), nevertheless would say that secular man and society has misunderstood and malpractised freedom. To put this point in another way, religion states that just as man needs freedom, he also needs authority – an authority to teach him and to guide him.[85] In the realm of religion, the Messenger of

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[84] S.E. Maxwell, H.D. Delaney, *Designing Experiments and Analyzing Data*, pp. 6-11.
[85] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.308-310

God is the ultimate teacher of moral standards for humanity. In all processes of education, this relationship of authority (between the teacher and student) exists, and one important prerequisite of an effective learning experience is reverence of that relationship. The proper understanding of this authority (and it must not be confused with the totally separate concept of authoritarianism) applies not only to models of teaching secular knowledge, but also, and perhaps more importantly, ethical knowledge. In the latter instance, the moral qualities of the teacher or leader are fundamentally crucial. In our secular world, because of misunderstandings related to freedom and authority as well as the moral torpidity of many of its teachers and leaders, standards of effective education, in particular, ethical education, are progressively eroding, (but which is being ignored by fashionable references to the phenomenon of moral relativity). This withering moral dimension has correspondingly diminished our collective vision of the nobility of man, leading in turn to impoverished ideas as to what progress for humanity can be and how it can be brought about.

As a result of the continual erosion of moral knowledge and wisdom, and because the secular schools of moral philosophy (such as utilitarian and deontological ethics) cannot provide a lastingly effective inspiration towards selfless behaviour or the overcoming of prejudices, cohesion at the level of society will always be sensed (if at all present in the first place) as an uneasy truce of sorts (Religion itself being a source of another prejudice is discussed further below). While the religious viewpoint recognizes the importance of the contribution of technical advances (in the natural as well as social sciences, including those of economics and politics) towards social progress, and sees their necessity, by itself scientific knowledge is regarded as insufficient for social unity. The technical realm of science will only lead to meaningful and effective social improvements when it is coupled with adherence to moral principles. As long as the ethical realm is not given due attention or is devoid, at its centre, of the true love of God, social progress will always be incomplete and inadequate.[86] In brief, at all levels of society, the problem is that its citizens are not being sufficiently inspired to care for each other's welfare. Thus, the ever-present, ubiquitous examples of multi-layered and multi-faceted corruption, the widening income gap

[86] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 107

between the rich and poor, injustice stemming from racial, religious or gender-based prejudices – all of these cannot be resolved by scientific advances or the technical methods of socio-economic reforms alone.

Spiritual Maladies

Religion has always recognized how it itself can be the source of countless problems for humanity. Its most important diagnosis here is that, as a result of erroneous knowledge of God, religious adherents themselves can have ignorance, superstitions and prejudice that they (and in particular, the ecclesiastical leaders) are not aware of, nor have critically examined. In fact, religious leaders themselves have vested interests in fermenting such ignorance and bigotry amongst their followers, so that their own positions of power are maintained or enhanced.[87]

Among those who are willing to independently search for the true meanings of their religious beliefs, tensions can very often arise between them and their religious leaders or institutions. The role of critical thinking and freedom of interpretation vis-à-vis obedience to religious authority are matters that are not explicitly addressed in many religions, resulting thus in religious extremism as well as the splintering of religions into innumerable sects.

There is the additional and pervasive problem of insincerity or hypocrisy amongst religious adherents leading to all forms of double standards and an ever-widening divorce between words and deeds. Part of this challenge arises because of insufficient acknowledgement and discussion of the existential difficulties and psychological attachments that also face the religious community. The mere espousal of a religious belief is not going to automatically remove fundamental existential burdens and attachments, and further education about how specifically religion can help in this regard is vitally needed. Instead, what happens often enough is that these difficulties and dilemmas remain unexamined or rationalized away, rendering the exercise of moral courage and recovery of the moral position more difficult. In sum, the above problems in religion also contribute to prejudices and crime, the very problems decried by religion. In fact, murders committed in the name of religion often come with a

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[87] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 56-58

disturbing ferocity, as their perpetrators are ready to sacrifice their lives, believing fervently that their misdeeds are being conducted for the sake of God.

Knowing the distinctions between the true and false practices of religions as well as acknowledging the genuine difficulties and challenges of conducting the true practice are subject matters that are insufficiently addressed in religion. Instead, what is too often seen (perhaps because they are easier topics, not requiring painful reflection) is zealous missionary activity and feelings of moral superiority insidiously weaving their ways into many religious communities.

D) Prescription for our maladies

The solution to all ills (be they in the secular or religious realms, at the individual or societal levels) is the love of God, but it is a love that has to begin with the knowledge of God.[88] As stated earlier, this apprehension of God (based partly on reason and partly on faith) is tantamount to knowing the Messenger or the Manifestation of God – by knowing His life history and by reading and reflecting upon His revelation (the Words of God).[89] Striving to obey the laws of God further increases this knowledge.[90] This process of knowing God demands from the seeker an independent and unbiased search where religious beliefs must be tested for their reasonableness and rationality.[91] It is only in this way that extreme and false practices of religion as well as blind following of religious leaders can be avoided. For this reason, therefore, there are no priests in the Bahá'í Faith. The responsibility of knowing what religion is all about, and what should be done in relation to its injunctions rests totally with the individual believer.

The rational examination of the Manifestation of God and His revelation must end with a decision ultimately about His truth. The promise made in the Bahá'í Writings is that the capacity to recognize the Manifestation's truth, by the above-mentioned means, is within all of us.[92] Once this truth is acknowledged, the knowledge of God leads to the love of God (a never-

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[88] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.300
[89] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.105
[90] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.268
[91] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp.63-64
[92] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p.65

ending experience). Again it is important to reiterate that the only way to avoid the false form of the love of God is by critically and independently examining our knowledge of God. With the love of God, a two-fold obligation exists: to remain steadfast in the love and obedience of His revealed ordinances[93] (which promotes moral order at both the individual and societal levels). From such a standpoint, the principles of the oneness of God, religions and humanity are accepted. Consequently, the loving submission to God, the acquisition of virtues and a saintly character, the rendering of sincere service to our fellow man and the working towards justice and unity at larger and larger social levels come about. What benefits others and society matches with the aspirations of the individual, and effectively brings about development. In this way of life, the individual manages to fuse the two seemingly paradoxical injunctions of religion, namely detachment (from all, except God) and commitment (to work for the betterment of this world).

While secular humanistic ideals are sometimes described as a suitable alternative to religious ideals, the Bahá'í Writings make it clear that for a truly lasting and effective ethical lifestyle to be adopted, it has to be based on the knowledge and love of God. Otherwise, that ethical lifestyle will be "imperfect" – it will be ineffectual and will not be able to diffuse itself into society at large.[94] Moreover, if one were to judge perceptively and fairly, it will be noted that actually in the first place, all humanistic ideals, even when described in secular terms, have historically arisen from the inspiration and beauty of religious teachings.[95]

Conclusion

In this paper, some of the core concepts of the materialist perspective of the human condition have been contrasted with those of the religious perspective (see Table 1). Out of necessity, given the constraints of space (as well as the author's present abilities), these concepts have been covered broadly rather than explored in depth (including the missing area of the apparent differences that some religions themselves may have in

[93] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.268
[94] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 303, 305
[95] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *ibid*, p.304

the spiritual understanding of the human condition). Though there are some similarities between the materialist and religious perspectives, they are so only at the superficial level. Further analysis shows that the core beliefs of the two perspectives lead to fundamentally very different answers to the questions of who we are, what our world is and how we should live our lives. Thus, while at the simple level, the purpose of human existence from both the secular and spiritual paradigms is described to be happiness, the contents and basis of that happiness as well as their surrounding assumptions are very different indeed.

Table 1 The Human Condition: Summary of Main Concepts

Human Nature	Secular (Materialist) Paradigm	Spiritual (Religious) Paradigm
• Composition	Composed of matter	Three realities of existence: matter, soul and spirit
• Determinants of human nature	- By our genes - By our (often unconscious) psychological forces - By society's policies and values (including mode of economic production)	- Soul's potential is determined by its orientation towards, and love for, God.
• Human traits	-Reason is a slave of emotions/passions -Reason is supreme and controls emotions -Man is rationally self-centred (economic man)	-Reason is man's supreme virtue but he also needs faith to enable love of God to grow. -Degree of love of God determines degree of soul's spiritual qualities
• Purpose of life	-To achieve material happiness: pleasure, wealth, fame (at individual level); socio-economic progress (at society level). -More knowledge and	-To attain spiritual as well as material happiness; in fact, material progress must be founded upon spiritual principles (at both individual and society levels). Highest

	scientific advancements needed for material happiness.	social goal is unity. -Scientific knowledge must be linked with spiritual knowledge for humanity's happiness
• Of fate and death	-More knowledge needed to reduce negative impact of fate. Dream is to control fate, making it more predictable. -Significance of death: no comments offered to the universal existential anxiety about death.	-Love of God is equivalent to recognizing "He doeth as He willeth". The response to fate is to accept calmly that which is beyond our control. -Death is liberation from this existence and the soul's moving to another dimension to continue its spiritual growth.
• Of ethical behaviour	-Secular ethical theories can be developed but there are problems of moral relativity and not being able to inspire moral commitment. Self-interests often collide with society's interests.	- Ethical norms are founded upon the knowledge and love of God inspiring man to be of service to all. Self-interests (spiritual growth) match society's interests.
• Of freedom and equality/ oneness	-Vitally needed for individual's legitimate pursuits of material happiness.	- Vitally needed for both material and spiritual happiness but they must be understood in the context of the knowledge and love of God.
• World Around Us	- This world and universe is the one and only reality that we know and we have to solve its problems and make it a better place	- This world and universe is real but not the Ultimate reality - We must be committed to the world's betterment while remaining spiritually detached from it.

The greatest attractiveness of the materialist perspective is that it is immediately perceivable, systematically verifiable and immensely pragmatic for our earthly existence. Since that approach of empiricism and rationality has undeniably brought, and continues to bring, major scientific advances, there really appears to be no serious alternative. Yet this very same strength of scientific materialism becomes also its greatest weakness when we move from the material and technological realm to the ethical and meaning-related realm. Human nature is such that the ethical and meaning-related realm is as vital as the material and technological realm for happiness. In the arena of ethics and meaning however, as this paper has pointed out, scientific materialism has major methodological limitations that are most clearly demonstrated in its inability to give a coherent perspective on the finality and mystery of death.

The greatest strength of the religious perspective is that it offers rich and satisfying answers to deep queries in the ethical and meaning-related realm. Yet religion also emphasizes the importance and need for both rationality and science. What has therefore been argued in this work is that finally, it is the religious paradigm (as opposed to the materialist paradigm) that embraces both the above realms more effectively and that it is thus able to offer humanity, at both the individual and social level, better prospects for effective and lasting happiness.

Nevertheless, religion faces two significant challenges in the contemporary world. Firstly, since so many of its central tenets are not within the immediately observable range, religion will need to more openly discuss the basis of distinguishing between the proper and improper ways of understanding religion and how religious faith differs from religious fanaticism. The relationship between rationality and faith needs far more public clarification and so too does the demarcation between legitimate and illegitimate religion. In an era where a misinformed individual can do incalculable damage, far too many religion-based tragedies are already arising from lack of clarity on these issues. Secondly, even within the arena of proper religious understanding, the time has pressingly come for religious attitudes and endeavours to shift from an insular and inward-looking mould to a far more open and world-embracing one. Especially important in this regard is furthering the development of religious practice (applied religion, parallel to the concept of applied science). Religion cannot afford to be only discussing abstract

subject matters (such as soul and spirit) and being engaged with social charities, important as these activities are. In this era, religion must be prepared to do far more so that its adherents are truly able to contribute to the betterment of the world.

As this paper has tried to show, the secular world is in want of more ideas and examples to transcend its many dilemmas (such as the existentialist anxieties of meaninglessness, aloneness and death as well as the difficulties of incorporating both equity and efficiency into economic progress). It is the duty of religion to first, respectfully and intelligently, apply its cherished spiritual principles into a practical and useful format so as to develop reasonable solutions to the real problems of the world and then to offer these solutions for further discussion in both academic and public settings. Finally, religion must also be prepared to demonstrate by action the actual effectiveness of its proposed solutions (even if its results can only be seen in the long run). Needless to say, such engagements with the world will require from religious adherents both profound religious knowledge as well as profound technical knowledge, and no doubt, sincere spiritual qualities. But this is a challenge that religion cannot turn down, given the world's current ills and it is only with such engagement (through both sensible, practical ideas and inspiring, selfless action) that the true beauty and value of religion becomes clearer for all to see.

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My dear wife, Ing Ing has provided much patient support, warmth and a hearing ear throughout this work's long and difficult gestation period and it would have been impossible for me to complete it without her. I want to thank her for her love. Anjam's example and encouragement continues to provide inspiration and his incisive comments as well as patience towards the end is deeply appreciated. Without his help, there would have been many more portions of wonderfully laughable and inappropriate text.

At various points of presenting and writing this paper, images of Antonella Khursheed came by in relation to my earlier 1999 paper when I became aware of her dedication and determination to help Bahá'í scholarship in our community. While this paper's quality does not match

to her standards, its underlying efforts have been arduous and sincere enough and it is thus humbly dedicated to her memory.

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Religion in the Modern World

Anjam Khursheed

Abstract

This paper examines some aspects of the Western secular rebellion against theocracy that has occurred over the last 500 years. Amongst other things, it traces the rise of free enquiry and freedom of conscience, and describes how they challenge religion in the modern world. It argues that the roots of secularism are in fact religious and are not opposed to the fundamental truths of religion. It brings out these points by considering several historical events that were important to the development of modern secularism, such as the European Reformation and Galileo's conflict with the Papacy. The paper discusses the implications of the modern Western secular challenge to traditional religious cultures around the world in general, and to the Bahá'í community in particular. It concludes that alongside the need for religions to incorporate secular values, there is also a need for religions to return to their traditional role of strengthening family unity and building up united communities that serve mankind.

1. Introduction

Religion in the Western world has been on the retreat for many centuries now. Sacred values, in the name of science, freedom and democracy, have progressively diminished their influence. Religious freedom today means that no spiritual leader or institution can pressure us into accepting anything any longer. All of us have the duty to think for ourselves and arrive at our own opinions. Religious beliefs can no longer be simply determined by cultural identity, by tradition or ancestral heritage. Religious beliefs are our own personal responsibility and no one has the right of interference. Religious freedom also means that morality and

ethics is largely a matter of personal choice, and not something that can be imposed upon us by religious authorities.

Free enquiry demands that religious beliefs be in accord with science. There is nothing so sacrosanct that it cannot be investigated. In matters of truth, nothing can be accepted simply on the weight of authority. If religious beliefs are to be credible, they must first pass the test of scientific scrutiny. In matters of truth, it is no longer possible to hide behind the cover of infallible authority.

Modern democracy demands that religion be more open about its beliefs. Everyone has the right to be heard. Everyone's opinion from the outset has equal weight. Community affairs can no longer be run by edicts issued by a single individual spiritual leader or an elect council. Community affairs should be grounded in consultation and mutual respect, where each individual is free to express his or her opinions.

It is misleading to think of science, freedom and democracy as secular alternatives to religion in Western culture. "Secular" does not necessarily entail disbelief in God, or the giving up of many fundamental Christian values. In opinion polls taken in the USA, Germany, and the UK in the latter half of the 20th century, the majority of people interviewed believed in God and still identified themselves as basically Christian[1]. It is more accurate to think of secularisation as a process leading to the privatisation of religious faith and the decline of institutional religion. In the modern Western world, very few people still attend Church regularly, or respect the authority of its clergy.

Just how the modern Western secular outlook is affecting traditional religion around the world is complicated. Consider immigrants living in the West who come from traditionally strong religious communities, like Eastern European Jews and Pakistani Muslims living in Britain. On the one hand, the process of secularisation has been so profound that it has created a generation of immigrants who suffer from cultural alienation.[2]

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[1] quoted by H. Kung in *Does God Exist?* pp. 576-7.

[2] Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi Elect of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth, describes these immigrants as being in "that psychologically devastating no man's land between an excluded past and an excluding present," J. Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, p. 62.

Although these immigrants are more intellectually and morally independent than their fellow immigrants, their "education" seems to have come at the price of them having to step outside their own respective religious communities. On the other hand, in recent decades, a new generation of immigrants has been involved with a revival of traditional community identity, paralleled by a rise in religious fundamentalism.[3] Many of today's religious fundamentalist groups pitch their beliefs directly against modern Western secularism. Groups, for instance, like the Taliban in Afghanistan, while attempting to create an Islamic theocratic state, also provided a home to anti-Western militant groups. Each culture must, of course, find its own balance. This paper will attempt to outline in broad terms how a balance between traditional religion and modern secularism may be found.

It is also pertinent to ask how the Bahá'í Faith faces the challenges of modern Western secularism. Although the Bahá'í Faith is a relatively young world religion, having its roots in the modern era, it is also committed to the building of religious institutions. How the Bahá'í Faith aims to build up religious institutions in a world in which there is widespread opposition to organised religion will also be discussed in this paper.

It should be noted from the outset that the opinions expressed in this paper do not represent authoritative Bahá'í belief, but are my own personal reflections. They are not only based upon my reading of Western history and the Bahá'í writings, but come from my experience as a second generation Pakistani immigrant growing up in Britain who embraced the Bahá'í Faith at the age of 20.

2. The Freedom of Conscience Challenge

Today the word "secular" is synonymous with religious scepticism. Secular humanists for instance, consider the rejection of religious truths to be one of their founding principles[4] and at the same time, they see

[3] Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, pp. 71-83.

[4] In "A Secular Humanist Declaration" published in 1980, religious scepticism appears as one of ten principles. Part of the text reads, "Secular humanists may be agnostics, atheists, rationalists, or skeptics, but they find insufficient evidence for the claim that some divine

themselves as guardians of "reason, democracy and freedom."[5] Historically, the situation was quite different. Secularism, as it emerged out of medieval Christendom, was concerned with affirming religious truths, not rejecting them. It was aimed at purging religion from man-made dogmas, and it appealed to scripture for its inspiration. With the mass dissemination of the Bible in the latter half of the 15th century—the first book to be printed in the Western world, followed by the printing of many ancient classical books—the scene was set for revolt. Some decades later, early in the 16th century, two movements that challenged the foundations of medieval Christendom were born: the European Reformation and the European Renaissance. Both movements were inseparable from the impact of Islam on medieval Europe.[6] Both movements aimed at by-passing medieval clerical authority, and looked to ancient texts for their inspiration: the Bible in the case of the Reformation, and the classical works of Greece and Rome in the case of the Renaissance.

The 16th century Christian Reformation, initiated by the German theologian Martin Luther, was an important historical landmark for religious freedom and was inseparable from challenging the moral authority of the Pope. At a conference in 1537 AD, a group of Lutheran leaders met to formulate their doctrine. There, a statement entitled, "Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope," which directly challenged Papal authority, was made. This statement was later incorporated into the Lutheran Confession of Faith, the *Book of Concord*. The statement starts out by listing three areas on which it challenges the Pope: his spiritual leadership, his dealings with "secular dominions", and his authority in matters of personal salvation

> "The Roman Pontiff claims for himself [in the first place] that by divine right he is [supreme] above all bishops and

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purpose exists for the universe. They reject that God has intervened miraculously in history or revealed himself to a chosen few, or that he can save or redeem sinners.... We reject the divinity of Jesus, the divine mission of Moses, Mohammed, and other latter-day prophets and saints of the various sects and denominations," Paul Kurtz, *In Defense of Secular Humanism*, pp. 18-19.

[5] *Ibid.*, p.15.

[6] see A. Khursheed, "Medieval Islam: The influence of Islam on Judaism and Christianity," *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review, Vol. 2*, pp 175-229.

pastors [in all Christendom].

Secondly, he adds also that by divine right he has both swords, i.e., the authority also of bestowing kingdoms [enthroning and deposing kings, regulating secular dominions etc.].

And thirdly, he says that to believe this is necessary for salvation. And for these reasons the Roman bishop calls himself [and boasts that he is] the vicar of Christ on earth. These three articles we hold to be false, godless, tyrannical, and [quite] pernicious to the Church.

Now, in order that our proof [reason and opinion] may be [better] understood, we shall first define what they call being above all [what it means that he boasts of being supreme] by divine right. For they mean that he is universal [that the Pope is the general bishop over the entire Christian Church], or, as they say, ecumenical bishop, i.e., from whom all bishops and pastors throughout the entire world ought to seek ordination and [confirmation, who [alone] is to have the right of electing, ordaining, confirming, deposing all bishops [and pastors]. Besides this, he arrogates to himself the authority to make [all kinds of] laws concerning acts of worship, concerning changing the Sacraments [and] concerning doctrine, and wishes his articles, his decrees, his laws [his statutes and ordinances] to be considered equal to the divine laws [to other articles of the Christian Creed and the Holy Scriptures], i.e., he holds that by the papal laws the consciences of men are so bound that those who neglect them, even without public offense, sin mortally [that they cannot be omitted without sin. For he wishes to found this power upon divine right and the Holy Scriptures; yea, he wishes to have it preferred to the Holy Scriptures and God's commands]. And what he adds is still more horrible, namely, that it is necessary to believe all these things in order to be saved [all these

> things shall and must be believed at the peril of forfeiting salvation]."[7]

The statement goes on to reject the attitude of allowing for superiority amongst Bishops, and cites Biblical text to suggest that a more Christian approach is one of humble service:

> "In the first place, therefore, let us show from the [holy] Gospel that the Roman bishop is not by divine right above [cannot arrogate to himself any supremacy whatever over] other bishops and pastors.
>
> Luke 22: 25. Christ expressly prohibits lordship among the apostles [that no apostle should have any supremacy over the rest]. For this was the very question, namely, that when Christ spake of His passion, they were disputing who should be at the head, and as it were the vicar of the absent Christ. There Christ reproves this error of the apostles and teaches that there shall not be lordship or superiority among them, but that the apostles should be sent forth as equals to the common ministry of the Gospel. Accordingly, He says: The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors, but ye shall not be so; but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. The antithesis here shows [By holding these matters against one another one sees] that lordship [among the apostles] is disapproved.
>
> II. Matt. 18: 2. The same is taught by the parable when Christ in the same dispute concerning the kingdom places a little child in the midst, signifying that among ministers there is not to be sovereignty, just as a child neither takes nor seeks sovereignty for himself.
>
> III. John 20: 21. Christ sends forth His disciples on an equality, without any distinction [so that no one of them was to have more or less power than any other], when He

[7] "Of the Power and Primacy of the Pope," *The Book of Concord*.

> says: As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you. [These words are clear and plain:] He says that He sends them individually in the same manner as He Himself was sent; hence He grants to no one a prerogative or lordship above the rest."[8]

These passages make it clear that authoritarian institutions cannot claim to be truly Christian. The Christian spirit does not reside in leadership, but lies in humble service and fellowship. Lutherans in the 16th century judged Papal attempts at regulating matters such as Bishop ordination and acts of worship to be intrusions into the politics of leadership, rather than something concerned with serving the spiritual mission of Christ. The Lutheran movement was not sceptical about religion, but it was secular in the sense that it opposed the political ambitions of religious authorities. This is even more clearly evident in its opposition to the Papacy laying claim to the rule of various Kingdoms. The Lutheran movement believed in a strict separation between the spiritual mission of the Church and the political affairs of the State. Again, they cited biblical passages to support their view:

> "The second article is still clearer, that Christ gave to the apostles only spiritual power, i.e., the command to teach the Gospel, to announce the forgiveness of sins, to administer the Sacraments, to excommunicate the godless without bodily force [by the Word], and that He did not give the power of the sword, or the right to establish, occupy or confer kingdoms of the world [to set up or depose kings]. For Christ says, Matt. 28, 19. 20: Go ye, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; also John 20, 21: As My Father hath sent Me, even so send I you.
>
> Now, it is manifest that Christ was not sent to bear the sword or possess a worldly kingdom [rule in a worldly fashion], as He Himself says, John 18, 36: My kingdom is not of this world. And Paul says, 2 Cor. 1, 24: Not for that we have dominion over your faith; and 2 Cor. 10, 4:

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[8] *Ibid*

The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, etc."[9]

The Lutheran statement goes on to describe some of the undesirable historical consequences of the Papacy laying claim to the rule of "worldly Kingdoms":

> "Accordingly, that Christ in His passion is crowned with thorns and led forth to be derided in royal purple, this signified that in the future, after His spiritual kingdom was despised, i.e., the Gospel was suppressed, another kingdom of a worldly kind would be set up [in its place] with the pretext of ecclesiastical power. Therefore the Constitution of Boniface VIII and the chapter Omnes, Dist. 22 and similar opinions which contend that the Pope is by divine right the ruler of the kingdoms of the world, are [utterly] false and godless. From this persuasion horrible darkness has been brought into the Church, and after that also great commotions have arisen in Europe. For the ministry of the Gospel was neglected, the knowledge of faith and the spiritual kingdom became extinct, Christian righteousness was supposed to be that external government which the Pope had established.
>
> Next, the Popes began to seize upon kingdoms for themselves; they transferred kingdoms, they vexed with unjust excommunications and wars the kings of almost all nations in Europe, but especially the German emperors, sometimes for the purpose of occupying cities of Italy, at other times for the purpose of reducing to subjection the bishops of Germany, and wresting from the emperors the conferring of episcopates. Yea, in the Clementines it is even written: When the empire is vacant, the Pope is the legitimate successor.
>
> Thus the Pope has not only usurped dominion, contrary to Christ's command, but has also tyrannically exalted himself above all kings. And in this matter the deed itself is not to be reprehended as much as it is to be detested,

[9] *Ibid.*

> that he assigns as a pretext the authority of Christ; that he transfers the keys to a worldly government; that he binds salvation to these godless and execrable opinions, when he says it is necessary to salvation for men to believe that this dominion belongs to him by divine right.
>
> Since these great errors obscure [the doctrine of] faith and [of] the kingdom of Christ they are in no way to be concealed. For the result shows that they have been great pests to the Church."[10]

The separation of Church and State is now of course, a fundamental ethic of the modern Western world. It is one of the defining features of secularism. But to insist that there be such a separation does not mean one is being sceptical about religion. In fact, being secular in this sense is arguably being more true to the spiritual mission of Christianity. Building a theocracy ruled by religious leaders is not the founding aim of Christianity. Christians are called upon to build a spiritual domain on earth, the "Kingdom of God."

Dissent against unjust and cruel institutions on the basis of freedom of conscience, another sacred value of the modern Western world, was also articulated in the Reformation. This was also invoked by the Lutherans on Biblical authority:

> "In the third place, this must be added: Even though the bishop of Rome had the primacy and superiority by divine right nevertheless obedience would not be due those pontiffs who defend godless services, idolatry, and doctrine conflicting with the Gospel. Nay; such pontiffs and such a government ought to be held accursed, as Paul clearly teaches, Gal. 1, 8: Though an angel from heaven preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. And in Acts 5, 29: We ought to obey God rather than men. Likewise the canons also clearly teach that a heretical Pope is not to be obeyed....
>
> ....To dissent from the agreement of so many nations and to be called schismatics is a grave matter. But divine

[10] *Ibid.*

> authority commands all not to be allies and defenders of impiety and unjust cruelty.
>
> On this account our consciences are sufficiently excused; for the errors of the kingdom of the Pope are manifest. And Scripture with its entire voice exclaims that these errors are a teaching of demons and of Antichrist. The idolatry in the profanation of the masses is manifest, which, besides other faults [besides being altogether useless] are shamelessly applied to most shameful gain [and trafficking]. The doctrine of repentance has been utterly corrupted by the Pope and his adherents. For they teach that sins are remitted because of the worth of our works. Then they bid us doubt whether the remission takes place. They nowhere teach that sins are remitted freely for Christ's sake, and that by this faith we obtain remission of sins.
>
> Thus they obscure the glory of Christ, and deprive consciences of firm consolation, and abolish true divine services, namely, the exercises of faith struggling with [unbelief and] despair [concerning the promise of the Gospel].
>
> They have obscured the doctrine concerning sin, and have invented a tradition concerning the enumeration of offenses, producing many errors and despair. They have devised, in addition, satisfactions, whereby they have also obscured the benefit [and merit] of Christ. From these, indulgences have been born, which are pure lies, fabricated for the sake of gain. Then, how many abuses and what horrible idolatry the invocation of saints has produced! What shameful acts have arisen from the tradition concerning celibacy!"[11]

Dissent based upon Freedom of Conscience is not a principle that necessarily undermines religious authority. It merely means that religious institutions, just like individuals, must be held responsible for their actions. Religious institutions cannot place themselves beyond justice.

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[11] *Ibid.*

This is precisely what the Lutherans thought the Papacy was doing. The Papacy took on the role of administering justice and exempted itself from being subjected to any independent judicial inquiry. This also led to censure of public debate and discussion. The Lutherans called on Kings to curb "the license of the Popes":

> "Then to these errors two great sins are added: The first, that he defends these errors by unjust cruelty and death-penalties. The second, that he wrests the decision from the Church, and does not permit ecclesiastical controversies [such matters of religion] to be judged according to the prescribed mode; yea he contends that he is above the Council, and can rescind the decrees of Councils, as the canons sometimes impudently speak. But that this was much more impudently done by the pontiffs, examples testify.
>
> Quest. 9, canon 3, says: No one shall judge the first seat; for the judge is judged neither by the emperor, nor by all the clergy, nor by the kings, nor by the people.
> The Pope exercises a twofold tyranny: he defends his errors by force and by murders, and forbids judicial examination. The latter does even more injury than any executions because, when the true judgment of the Church is removed, godless dogmas and godless services cannot be removed, and for many ages they destroy innumerable souls.
>
> Therefore let the godly consider the great errors of the kingdom of the Pope and his tyranny, and let them ponder, first, that the errors must be rejected and the true doctrine embraced, for the glory of God and to the salvation of souls. Then let them ponder also how great a crime it is to aid unjust cruelty in killing saints, whose blood God will undoubtedly avenge....
>
> ....And even though the Pope should hold Synods [a Council], how can the Church be healed if the Pope suffers nothing to be decreed contrary to his will, if he allows no one to express his opinion except his adherents whom he has bound by dreadful oaths and curses to the

> defense of his tyranny and wickedness without any exception concerning God's Word [not even the Word of God being excepted]....
>
> ....But since the decisions of Synods are the decisions of the Church, and not of the Popes, it is especially incumbent on kings to check the license of the Popes [not allow such wantonness], and to act so that the power of judging and decreeing from the Word of God is not wrested from the Church. And as the rest of the Christians must censure all other errors of the Pope, so they must also rebuke the Pope when he evades and impedes the true investigation and true decision of the Church."[12]

These themes—spiritual equality, the necessity of having an independent judiciary and the need to have open public debate and inquiry—are, of course, now commonplace in the modern Western world.[13] At the time of the Reformation in Christian Europe, their public support often led to death. The basic premiss on which they are founded is that there is no institution, religious or otherwise, which can place itself above justice. This principle need not undermine the authority of the Church or any other religious institution, providing, that is, they act justly.

3. The Scientific Challenge

The second major secular blow to Papal authority came in the name of scientific free enquiry, around a century after the Reformation started.

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[12] *Ibid.*

[13] They appear for instance in the famous *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, approved by the National Assembly of France, August 26, 1789, which is taken to be the charter for modern democracy: "1. .Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be founded only upon the general good....10. No one shall be disquieted on account of his opinions, including his religious views, provided their manifestation does not disturb the public order established by law. 11.The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law." Gerald Murphy, *The Cleveland Free-Net.*

This secular scientific challenge has had many repercussions for religion in modern times. The dispute not only continued to undermine Papal authority, but also raised important questions concerning the relationship of scientific facts and theories to sacred religious text. It has contributed greatly to the widespread belief today that modern science is fundamentally opposed to religion, that religious scepticism is an inherent part of the modern scientific world view.

The infamous episode that most clearly brings out these issues is the conflict between the Italian physicist Galileo Galilei with the Papacy in the 17th century. Galileo, of course, needs no introduction. His scientific achievements include: discovering the properties of the pendulum; inventing the thermometer; formulating the laws that govern the motion of falling bodies; and using the telescope to make observations of the Moon, Sun, planets and stars.

It is particularly with respect to the way Galileo went about verifying scientific hypotheses that he is best remembered. He devised and carried out his own experiments, rather than relying on second-hand information through tradition. His experimental demonstrations, such as dropping metal objects from the top of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, or of rolling balls down an incline plane, are well-known even to many who have never studied science. For Galileo, free enquiry in the pursuit of truth was also an essential part of the scientific method:

> "It appears to me that they who in proof of anything rely simply on the weight of authority, without adducing any argument in support of it, act very absurdly. I, on the contrary, wish to be allowed to raise questions freely and to answer without any adulation [of authorities] as becomes those who are truly in search of the truth."[14]

It should be pointed out that although Galileo is frequently cited as being the first to use the modern experimental approach, he was in fact preceded by the English physician William Gilbert. Gilbert carried out original experiments in the field of electricity and magnetism. In 1600 AD, Gilbert published his book, *De Magnete*, which laid the foundations of modern

[14] S. Drake, *Galileo*, p. 23.

electricity and magnetism. Galileo was a great admirer of Gilbert's work. Gilbert, like Galileo, found it necessary to emphasise the importance of carrying out one's own experiments in scientific investigation first hand, rather than relying on the words of traditional authorities:

> "Many modern authors have written about amber and jet attracting chaff and other facts unknown to the generality: with the results of their labors booksellers' shops are crammed full. Our generation has produced many volumes about recondite, abstruse and occult causes and wonders, and in all of them amber and jet are represented as attracting chaff; but never a proof from experiment, never a demonstration do you find in them. The writers deal only in words that involve in thicker darkness subject-matter; they treat the subject esoterically, miracle-mongeringly, abstrusely, reconditely, mystically. Hence such philosophy bears no fruit; for it rests simply on a few Greek or unusual terms—just as our barbers toss off a few Latin words in the hearing of the ignorant rabble in token of their learning, and thus win reputation—bears no fruit, because few of the philosophers are themselves investigators, or have any first-hand acquaintance with things."[15]

At the time of Galileo, two traditional sources of authority were used to block or stifle scientific free enquiry: the Catholic Church, and the science of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotelian learning had been synthesised into Christian doctrine by many theologians and philosophers during the medieval period, and their tradition of scholasticism dominated university education. Galileo was brought into conflict with both these authorities with his support for the Copernican theory in astronomy. The medieval belief of the Sun and planets moving around a stationary Earth rested on the authority of ancient Greek texts from Aristotle and Ptolemy, and on the common interpretations of scripture. The relevant passages in the Bible that appear to describe a stationary Earth and moving Sun are as follows:

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[15] W. Gilbert, *De Magnete*, p. 77.

> "The Lord reigneth, he is clothed with majesty; the Lord is clothed with strength, wherewith he hath girded himself: the world also is established, that it cannot be moved. Thy throne is established of old: thou art from everlasting" (Ps 93: 1-2).
>
> "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he set a tabernacle for the sun, which is as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof" (Ps 19: 1-6).

Galileo was summoned to Rome in 1616 AD and was obliged by the Catholic Church to renounce his support for the Copernican system. However, in 1623 AD, Cardinal Barberini, a friend of Galileo's, became Pope Urban VIII. This gave Galileo a new sense of security and prompted him to write his *Dialogues on the Two Great Systems of the World*, published in 1632 AD. This work, although purporting to give a neutral comparison between the Copernican and Ptolemaic systems, in practice contained many strong arguments in favour of the former. Once again Galileo was summoned to Rome, this time in 1633 AD as an old man of sixty-nine. His one-time friend and now bitter enemy, Pope Urban VIII, allowed Galileo to be threatened with torture if he refused to recant. After recanting, he was condemned to prison, but this was changed to a mild form of house-arrest which lasted until the year of his death in 1642 AD.

Galileo was not a religious sceptic. He was a committed Catholic who accepted the truth of divine revelation and the spiritual authority of the Pope. This meant that Galileo accepted the truth of the Bible. How Galileo reconciled the apparent clash of the Copernican theory and the above passages from the Bible is insightful for the general relationship between science and religion.

Galileo's basic approach was to propose that the main purpose of religious scripture is to convey spiritual truths, and any reference to scientific knowledge is incidental. To this end, scripture uses simple symbolic language that everyone can understand. But because it deals with complex subjects, like the nature of God or human nature, it can be interpreted in many different ways, and for this reason, we must not be dogmatic or too literal in our interpretations of it. Religious language is like poetry, quite unlike the precise language of mathematics used to describe the laws of physics. Galileo said that in scripture, there is much more than "what its bare words signify." This means that where scientific knowledge conflicts with scripture, it forces us to reinterpret scripture. This, according to Galileo, is not a problem since scripture in any case is primarily about conveying spiritual truths and not scientific ones. Galileo thought the realms of science and religion were quite separate: religion deals with subjects such as the attributes of God and human salvation, while science deals with the physical universe. Galileo describes it as: "the intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven. not how heaven goes." Both Nature and scripture are revealed by God, but they deal with different realms of human experience. Galileo cites various respected Christian saints to demonstrate that his view is already well supported within the Christian tradition. These views are articulated in a letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany in 1615 AD. Part of the Galileo's letter reads:

> "The reason produced for condemning the opinion that the earth moves and the sun stands still in many places in the Bible one may read that the sun moves and the earth stands still. Since the Bible cannot err; it follows as a necessary consequence that anyone takes a erroneous and heretical position who maintains that the sun is inherently motionless and the earth movable.
>
> With regard to this argument, I think in the first place that it is very pious to say and prudent to affirm that the holy Bible can never speak untruth-whenever its true meaning is understood. But I believe nobody will deny that it is often very abstruse, and may say things which are quite different from what its bare words signify. Hence in expounding the Bible if one were always to confine oneself to the unadorned grammatical meaning, one

might fall into error. Not only contradictions and propositions far from true might thus be made to appear in the Bible, but even grave heresies and follies. Thus it would be necessary to assign to God feet, hands and eyes, as well as corporeal and human affections, such as anger, repentance, hatred, and sometimes even the forgetting of things past and ignorance of those to come. These propositions uttered by the Holy Ghost were set down in that manner by the sacred scribes in order to accommodate them to the capacities of the common people, who are rude and unlearned. For the sake of those who deserve to be separated from the herd, it is necessary that wise expositors should produce the true senses of such passages, together with the special reasons for which they were set down in these words. This doctrine is so widespread and so definite with all theologians that it would be superfluous to adduce evidence for it.

Hence I think that I may reasonably conclude that whenever the Bible has occasion to speak of any physical conclusion (especially those which are very abstruse and hard to understand), the rule has been observed of avoiding confusion in the minds of the common people which would render them contumacious toward the higher mysteries. Now the Bible, merely to condescend to popular capacity, has not hesitated to obscure some very important pronouncements, attributing to God himself some qualities extremely remote from (and even contrary to) His essence. Who, then, would positively declare that this principle has been set aside, and the Bible has confined itself rigorously to the bare and restricted sense of its words, when speaking but casually of the earth, of water, of the sun, or of any other created thing? Especially in view of the fact that these things in no way concern the primary purpose of the sacred writings, which is the service of God and the salvation of souls - matters infinitely beyond the comprehension of the common people.

This being granted, I think that in discussions of physical

problems we ought to begin not from the authority of scriptural passages but from sense and shy;experiences and necessary demonstrations; for the holy Bible and the phenomena of nature proceed alike from the divine Word the former as the dictate of the Holy Ghost and the latter as the observant executrix of God's commands. It is necessary for the Bible, in order to be accommodated to the understanding of every man, to speak many things which appear to differ from the absolute truth so far as the bare meaning of the words is concerned. But Nature, on the other hand, is inexorable and immutable; she never transgresses the laws imposed upon her, or cares a whit whether her abstruse reasons and methods of operation are understandable to men. For that reason it appears that nothing physical which senseexperience sets before our eyes, or which necessary demonstrations prove to us, ought to be called in question (much less condemned) upon the testimony of biblical passages which may have some different meaning beneath their words. For the Bible is not chained in every expression to conditions as strict as those which govern all physical effects; nor is God any less excellently revealed in Nature's actions than in the sacred statements of the Bible. Perhaps this is what Tertullian meant by these words: "We conclude that God is known first through Nature, and then again, more particularly, by doctrine, by Nature in His works, and by doctrine in His revealed word."

From this I do not mean to infer that we need not have an extraordinary esteem for the passages of holy Scripture. On the contrary, having arrived at any certainties in physics, we ought to utilize these as the most appropriate aids in the true exposition of the Bible and in the investigation of those meanings which are necessarily contained therein, for these must be concordant with demonstrated truths. I should judge that the authority of the Bible was designed to persuade men of those articles and propositions which, surpassing all human reasoning could not be made credible by science, or by any other means than through the very mouth of the Holy Spirit.

Yet even in those propositions which are not matters of faith, this authority ought to be preferred over that of all human writings which are supported only by bare assertions or probable arguments, and not set forth in a demonstrative way. This I hold to be necessary and proper to the same extent that divine wisdom surpasses all human judgment and conjecture.

But I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with senses, reason and intellect has intended us to forego their use and by some other means to give us knowledge which we can attain by them. He would not require us to deny sense and reason in physical matters which are set before our eyes and minds by direct experience or necessary demonstrations. This must be especially true in those sciences of which but the faintest trace (and that consisting of conclusions) is to be found in the Bible. Of astronomy; for instance, so little is found that none of the planets except Venus are so much as mentioned, and this only once or twice under the name of "Lucifer." If the sacred scribes had had any intention of teaching people certain arrangements and motions of the heavenly bodies, or had they wished us to derive such knowledge from the Bible, then in my opinion they would not have spoken of these matters so sparingly in comparison with the infinite number of admirable conclusions which are demonstrated in that science. Far from pretending to teach us the constitution and motions of the heavens and other stars, with their shapes, magnitudes, and distances, the authors of the Bible intentionally forbore to speak of these things, though all were quite well known to them. Such is the opinion of the holiest and most learned Fathers, and in St. Augustine we find the following words : "It is likewise commonly asked what we may believe about the form and shape of the heavens according to the Scriptures, for many contend much about these matters. But with superior prudence our authors have forborne to speak of this, as in no way furthering the student with respect to a blessed life-and,

more important still, as taking up much of that time which should be spent in holy exercises. What is it to me whether heaven, like a sphere surrounds the earth on all sides as a mass balanced in the center of the universe, or whether like a dish it merely covers and overcasts the earth? Belief in Scripture is urged rather for the reason we have often mentioned; that is, in order that no one, through ignorance of divine passages, finding anything in our Bibles or hearing anything cited from them of such a nature as may seem to oppose manifest conclusions, should be induced to suspect their truth when they teach, relate, and deliver more profitable matters. Hence let it be said briefly, touching the form of heaven, that our authors knew the truth but the Holy Spirit did not desire that men should learn things that are useful to no one for salvation."

The same disregard of these sacred authors toward beliefs about the phenomena of the celestial bodies is repeated to us by St. Augustine in his next chapter. On the question whether we are to believe that the heaven moves or stands still, he writes thus: "Some of the brethren raise a question concerning the motion of heaven, whether it is fixed or moved. If it is moved, they say, how is it a firmament? If it stands still, how do these stars which are held fixed in it go round from east to west, the more northerly performing shorter circuits near the pole, so that the heaven (if there is another pole unknown to us) may seem to revolve upon some axis, or (if there is no other pole) may be thought to move as a discus? To these men I reply that it would require many subtle and profound reasonings to find out which of these things is actually so; but to undertake this and discuss it is consistent neither with my leisure nor with the duty of those whom I desire to instruct in essential matters more directly conducing to their salvation and to the benefit of the holy Church."

From these things it follows as a necessary consequence that, since the Holy Ghost did not intend to teach us whether heaven moves or stands still, whether its shape is

spherical or like a discus or extended in a plane, nor whether the earth is located at its center or off to one side, then so much the less was it intended to settle for us any other conclusion of the same kind. And the motion or rest of the earth and the sun is so closely linked with the things just named, that without a determination of the one, neither side can be taken in the other matters. Now if the Holy Spirit has purposely neglected to teach us propositions of this sort as irrelevant to the highest goal (that is, to our salvation), how can anyone affirm that it is obligatory to take sides on them, that one belief is required by faith, while the other side is erroneous? Can an opinion be heretical and yet have no concern with the salvation of souls? Can the Holy Ghost be asserted not to have intended teaching us something that does concern our salvation? I would say here something that was heard from an ecclesiastic of the most eminent degree: "That the intention of the Holy Ghost is to teach us how one goes to heaven not how heaven goes."

But let us again consider the degree to which necessary demonstrations and sense experiences ought to be respected in physical conclusions, and the authority they have enjoyed at the hands of holy and learned theologians. From among a hundred attestations I have selected the following: "We must also take heed, in handling the doctrine of Moses that we altogether avoid saying positively and confidently anything which contradicts manifest experiences and the reasoning of philosophy or the other sciences. For since every truth is in agreement with all other truth, the truth of Holy Writ cannot be contrary to the solid reasons and experiences of human knowledge." And in St. Augustine we read: "If anyone shall set the authority of Holy Writ against clear and manifest reason, he who does this knows not what he has undertaken; for he opposes to the truth not the meaning of the Bible, which is beyond his comprehension, but rather his own interpretation, not what is in the Bible, but what he has found in himself and imagines to be there."

> This granted, and it being true that two truths cannot contradict one another, it is the function of expositors to seek out the true senses of scriptural texts. These will unquestionably accord with the physical conclusions which manifest sense and necessary demonstrations have previously made certain to us."[16]

Ironically, Galileo's well-reasoned theology was quoted by the Pope in 1992 in his Apology to Galileo. Galileo's theology is the basis of the Catholic Church's present position. The Pope in 1992 stated:

> "Thus the new science, with its methods and the freedom of research which they implied, obliged theologians to examine their own criteria of scriptural interpretation. Most of them did not know how to do so. Paradoxically, Galileo, a sincere believer, showed himself to be more perceptive in this regard than the theologians who opposed him. "If Scripture cannot err," he wrote to Benedetto Castelli, "certain of its interpreters and commentators can and do so in many ways." We also know of his letter to Christine de Lorraine (1615) which is like a short treatise on biblical hermeneutics."[17]

Galileo's conflict with the Pope is liable to give the impression that religion in the 17th century opposed science, but this would be untrue. There were other scientific pioneers of the 17th century who did not receive religious opposition for their support of the Copernican theory. Take for example German-born Johan Kepler (1571-1630 AD), a contemporary of Galileo. Kepler was the first professional astronomer to publicly support the Copernican theory of the universe, and his three planetary laws of motion laid the foundations of modern astronomy. Kepler's achievements in modern science rival Galileo's contributions to modern physics. Like Galileo, Kepler carried out his own scientific investigations first hand, and did not rely on tradition. But Germany was under the influence of the Protestant Reformation, which was rapidly

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[16] Galileo Galilei: "Letter to the Grand Duchess Christina of Tuscany, 1615," *Internet Modern History Sourcebook.*

[17] *L'Osservatore Romano N. 44 (1264)* - 4 November 1992.

spreading to other countries in Northern Europe. Although Protestant clerics spoke out against the Copernican theory on the basis of it contradicting scripture, religious interpretation for Protestants was a private matter, and Kepler did not receive any clerical opposition. The Protestant rebellion had been based precisely on the point of achieving greater freedom of thought, and in the 17th century, Catholic philosophers often fled to the more liberal Protestant countries of the North.

The Copernican System, far from undermining religious belief, did precisely the opposite for Kepler. He thought the Sun in the Copernican astronomical system took its rightful place at the centre of the universe, vindicating the power of God throughout the universe, driving the planets around it. In his mind, the Sun was not only a power of light and heat, but a source of Divine power reflecting God's dominion over the universe:

> "The sun in the middle of the moving stars, himself at rest and yet the source of motion, carries the image of God the Father and Creator....He distributes his motive power through a medium which contains the moving bodies even as the Father creates through the Holy Ghost."[18]

Preceding both Galileo and Kepler, William Gilbert's *De Magnete*, published in London, not only stated its support for the Copernican theory, but also provided the same type of theological observations later made by Galileo: that scripture is primarily about human spiritual themes put in simple symbolic language, and therefore, it cannot conflict with scientific truth:

> "Nor do those things which are adduced from the sacred scriptures seem to be specially adverse to the doctrine of the mobility of the Earth; nor does it seem to have been the intention of Moses or of the Prophets to promulgate any mathematical or physical niceties, but to adapt themselves to the understanding of the common people and their manner of speech, just as nurses are accustomed

[18] A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 264.

> to adapt themselves to infants, and not to go into every unnecessary detail...."[19]

De Magnete was published in the same year (1600 AD) that the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for his heterodox beliefs that included an espousal of the Copernican theory, and the assertion that the stars were an infinity of suns like our own, each circled by worlds inhabited by intelligent beings like ourselves.

Even within Italy, the Catholic Church was not so blind to the "New Science" as often supposed. Jesuit astronomers such as Father Clavius confirmed Galileo's early telescope discoveries and even improved on them. Leading clerics in the Catholic Order had no qualms about the Copernican system being a "working hypothesis." In fact, Cardinal Bellarmine, advisor to the Holy Office, when asked to comment on Galileo's support of the new heliocentric theory, stated that to support the Copernican system made "excellent sense":

> "For to say that the assumption that the Earth moves and the Sun stands still saves all the celestial appearances better than do eccentrics and epicycles is to speak with excellent sense and to run no risk whatever. Such a manner of speaking suffices for a mathematician...."[20]

The Cardinal did however stress that to insist that the Copernican theory was more than a theoretical proposition and represented the true state of affairs was likely to "injure our holy faith by contradicting the Scriptures." He also stated in the same letter that:

> "..if there were real proof that the Sun is in the centre of the universe....then we should have to proceed with great circumspection in explaining passages of Scripture which appear to teach the contrary, and we should rather have to say that we did not understand them than declare an opinion to be false which is proved to be true.."[21]

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[19] William Gilbert, *De Magnete*, foreword.
[20] A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 454.
[21] *Ibid.*, pp. 454-5.

This latter point is a very important one, and highlights an aspect of the dispute which is not generally well known. Had Galileo presented convincing proof in favour of the Copernican theory, the Catholic Church was ready to revise its interpretations of the Biblical passages in question rather than declare an "opinion to be false which is proved to be true." Galileo had however, apart from the ascetic and mathematical simplicity of the Copernican system, only one piece of experimental data that was directly in its favour: namely his observations of the different phases on the planet Venus. To counter this, there were compelling scientific objections against the Copernican theory. One such objection was that if the Copernican theory were correct, the fixed stars ought to reveal an annual parallax caused by the Earth's motion. But no such apparent displacement in the position of these stars was observed at the time. In fact confirmation of this effect had to await the development of more accurate telescopes, and only came in 1838 AD. In addition to this, the version of the Copernican system popularised by Galileo offered no advantages of accuracy over the Ptolemaic theory and the former ancient theory had the advantage that it could be directly affirmed by looking up into the sky. In general, the choice between whether or not to accept the Copernican system in Galileo's day was not so clear cut as often imagined. The historian of science Professor E. A. Burtt in his book, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, states that:

> "..it is safe to say that even had there been no religious scruples whatever against the Copernican astronomy, sensible men all over Europe, especially the most empirically minded, would have pronounced it a wild appeal to accept the premature fruits of an uncontrolled imagination, in preference to the solid inductions, built up gradually through the ages, of men's confirmed sense experience. In the strong sense of empiricism, so characteristic of present-day philosophy, it is well to remind ourselves of this fact. Contemporary empiricists, had they lived in the sixteenth century, would have been first to scoff out of court the new philosophy of the universe."[22]

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[22] E. A. Burtt, *The Metaphyiscal Foundations of Science*, p. 38.

The Catholic Church did not dogmatically reject the Copernican theory. As shown in Cardinal Bellamine's letter, which was a representative view taken by the Catholic Church as a whole, had Galileo been in the position of presenting stronger evidence to support the Copernican system, the church would have been prepared to revise its understanding of Scripture from a literal sense to a more symbolic one. When the decree banning Copernicus's *Book of the Revolutions* was finally issued in 1616 by the Catholic Order, the word heresy did not appear in it. The decree was issued "in order that this opinion may not insinuate itself any further to the prejudice of Catholic truth."[23] While individual accusations of heresy were certainly made by members of the Inquisition, they were not officially endorsed by the Papacy.

Towards the end of the 16th century, the Jesuit Order, the intellectual spearhead of the Catholic Church, began all over Europe to accept the Tycho Brahe astronomical model of the universe in favour of the Ptolemaic one. This scheme placed both the sun and earth at the centre of the universe, and thus can be thought of as a compromise between the Copernican and Ptolemaic system. Again, the Jesuits were prepared to treat the Copernican system as a "working hypothesis" in the first instance, until definitive proof was offered to the contrary: this was not an unreasonable position to take at the time. There were even some Jesuit priests who openly advocated the Copernican system not long after Galileo's conflict with the church had taken place. At the end of the 17th century, for example, Jesuit missionaries in China and Japan taught the heliocentric theory and made significant contributions in the spread of the new astronomy in the Far East.[24]

Given all this support for the Copernican theory from within the European Christian community, it is clear that Galileo's conflict with the Church was not one based upon modern science opposing religion. It was, rather, modern science opposing the authority of religious leaders or institutions for the right of free enquiry. The Papacy had made excursions into domains that lay beyond its jurisdiction, and the conflict, in the long run, placed limits on the Papacy's claim to infallibility. It also helped define the kinds of truth conveyed in religious scripture. It forced Christians to accept what many of them already knew to be true: namely that the Bible

[23] A. Koestler, *The Sleepwalkers*, p. 462.
[24] *Ibid.*, p. 503.

is a book primarily concerned with themes of spiritual progress and enlightenment, and not a book about scientific knowledge.

Galileo is remembered as a prophet of freedom in the cause of scientific free enquiry. Galileo's imprisonment is now widely used in the West to warn us of the dangers of following tradition and not thinking for oneself. It is taught to children at primary school level as a historical conflict between science and tradition. The secular challenge of free scientific enquiry has brought about a profound humbling experience for Christianity, and in that sense, it has helped religion. Modern scientific enquiry has liberated religion from blindly relying on authority or tradition.

Modern science has helped religion become less literal about its beliefs. The Copernican revolution forced Christians to realise that a geocentric view of the universe was not essential to a Christian world-view. Later, modern science helped them understand that the age of the Earth was not measured in thousands of years, but billions of years. Again, the lesson here was that Christians should not put their faith into literal interpretations of scripture, but seek to understand the underlying spiritual meanings behind it. In this way, modern science has greatly helped religion be less superstitious about its beliefs. Rather than working against religion, it has rendered religion a great service.

There is another sense in which modern science has purified Christian belief, and that is with respect to its age-old tendency to be anthropomorphic. Anthropomorphism is another kind of literalism. It comes from a loss of humility, in which Christians can forget the inherent mystery of God. This is most clearly apparent on the subject of divine intervention and miracles. In medieval times, divine intervention was invoked for all sorts of events that we now ascribe to natural causes, such as earthquakes, plagues etc. Scientific enquiry showed that events in Nature followed exact mathematical laws and principles. Physical events that were previously attributed to miraculous causes were in time given a scientific description based upon Natural Laws. Now, this did not mean science opposed religion. The 17th century pioneers of science described the "Book of Nature" in terms of God revealing his presence **through** Natural Laws, alongside the Book of Revelation. Kepler, for instance, thought human beings were empowered by God to decipher the divine

script in Nature, to uncover the eternal geometrical harmonies that existed before Creation: to share in timeless truths for which human beings were created, in God's likeness. These divine harmonies in Nature are much more powerful signs of God's likeness than anything which can be transmitted directly through the senses. In Kepler's words:

> "Why waste words? Geometry existed before the Creation, is co-eternal with the mind of God....geometry provided God with a model for the Creation and was implanted into man, together with God's own likeness—and not merely conveyed to his mind through the eyes."[25]

The 17th century Jewish philosopher Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza based much of his philosophy on purging Christian belief from its traditional anthropomorphism. He provided a description of God in terms of Natural Law rather than the miracle of divine intervention:

> "From these conclusions – that nothing happens in nature which does not follow from its laws, that its laws extend to all things conceived by the divine intellect itself, and finally, that nature maintains a fixed and immutable order – it clearly follows that the term "miracle" cannot be understood except in relation to men's opinions, and means nothing but a work whose natural cause we cannot explain by the example of another customary thing, or at least which cannot be so explained by the one who writes or relates the miracle."[26]

For Spinoza, the source of the problem lay in an overly literal theology, in which religious people interpreted everything in terms of their own capricious wishes:

> "that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end; indeed they maintain as certain that God himself directs all things to some certain

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[25] *Ibid.*, p. 264.
[26] Benedict de Spinoza, *Spinoza Reader*, p. 36.

All this does not mean God cannot act through divine intervention, or that God does not answer people's prayers, or that there is not a divine purpose for human beings. But it should remind religious people who believe in God that God's ways are a great mystery, and anything human beings ascribe to God or God's purpose has no ultimate importance. Objective knowledge of God is by definition impossible. In the words of St Paul, "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things we also speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual" (1 Cor. 1:12-13).

4. Family Unity and Community Identity

There are important aspects of human experience that are missed by science, freedom and democracy, but which have traditionally been the province of religion. Amongst them is the creation of family unity and community identity. In most, if not all, the world's religions, marriage is a sacred bond, involving spiritual commitments and obligations: it is certainly not founded on individual rights and freedoms. Marriage is about much more than the development of the individual, whether it is in terms of thinking for oneself or standing up for one's beliefs. In the Abrahamic religions, the union of marriage in a religious context is intimately related to creating a family, one that will serve both society and God. Marriage is nourished by religion's intention to create love and unity.

Religion creates community identity. Religion provides a certain way of life. Sacred places, whether temples, mosques or synagogues, are places in which people gather together in worship, in fellowship, sharing a common vision. They are places where births are announced, marriage vows are made, and where the dead are honoured. Religion inspires compassion and charity for the poor and needy. Community bonds, like family ties, are based upon people having commitments and duties to one another. Social order is dependent on us having respect for a higher authority. The demands of community sometimes require self-sacrifice and obedience. The rights and freedoms of secularism, although very important on the individual level, cannot provide a sense of community.

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another. Social order is dependent on us having respect for a higher authority. The demands of community sometimes require self-sacrifice and obedience. The rights and freedoms of secularism, although very important on the individual level, cannot provide a sense of community. Modern science encourages us to be more self-reliant, to think more for ourselves and to depend less on others. In short, while science, freedom and democracy strengthen the individual, it is religion that strengthens the family and the community.

If these observations are correct, the clash of secularism with religion in the modern world, or science with religion for that matter, is reflected in a conflict between the individual and the community. In the Western world, where secular values dominate, the sense of family unity and community identity has been greatly eroded, and it is individual ethics that take priority. The widespread breakdown of family unity is, for instance, reflected in the rapid increase of divorces and single parent families. On the level of community, there is a deep-rooted distrust of all forms of authority, not just religious ones. This has led to an increase in violence and social disorder. Take for instance, the anti-authoritarian attitudes that Western teenagers have at school towards their teachers, and the resulting problems of diminished school discipline. On the other hand, in countries where traditional religion is strong, the rights and freedoms of the individual are often subsumed by the dictates of family or community authority figures. Restrictions of personal freedoms and rights are usually justified by appealing to family and community stability.

Western democracy relies on its society having strong individual ethics, such as freedom of conscience and free enquiry. Democracy requires quite a high level of individual freedoms and rights before it can work. Each individual must be free to express his or her opinion, and that opinion must be taken seriously. Traditionally, most societies in the world have been run by individual leaders. This may explain why many non-Western countries struggle with having a democratic form of government. In addition, democracy does not address the issue of family unity and community identity. In a non-Western country where family unity and community identity is the primary concern, secular democracy seems individualistic and alien. It is wrong however, to think of the West as not having any religious identity. Most Western people still identify themselves to be Christian. But it is a privatised identity, one that only

comes to the surface occasionally, around Christmas time, or when it is under the threat of attack.[28] Jonathan Sacks makes the argument that Western secular societies are more religious than they suppose.[29]

If there is to be a truly multi-cultural form of secularism, the modern West needs to address family and community concerns, which inevitably take it back to religion. But there is a problem in this regard, and that is: religions do not always bring people together. In fact, it is the sectarian violence of religion today that dominates its public image. Instead of bringing a greater sense of spiritual equality and unity, religious people are often exclusive, parochial and authoritarian. The unity of a religious group only seems to exist for those believers within it. Outside the identity of the group, amongst people of different religious groups, there is widespread mistrust, prejudice and even hatred.

Religious corruption has been the driving inspiration for the rise of secular humanism. In addition to the defiance of Papal power, there has been an increasing disenchantment with the numerous wars waged in the name of religion. Sectarian violence for instance between Catholics and Protestants has been continuing now for nearly 500 years. Moral repulsion at all kinds of injustices perpetrated in the name of religion has arguably been more decisive in driving people towards secularism than any theological

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[28] On the day of the Sept. 11th Islamic militant attacks on America in the year 2001, the American President claimed that "Freedom had been attacked…." This was widely reported in the media. But in the subsequent days, people gathered in churches to remember their dead and try to come to terms with what had happened. In their hour of need, they came together as a community in churches. Their response to the crisis was rooted in the belief that Good shall triumph over Evil, a familiar Christian theme.

[29] In relation to marriage, he notes, "Overwhelmingly we do still marry, and hope that our marriages will last. In a recent survey almost nine out of ten of those interviewed said they valued faithfulness as the most important ingredient in marriage. We still believe in the family, without quite knowing why. The family is a religious institution that survives in a secular culture." J. Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, p. 57. On a more general theme, he writes, "If someone invented a religion detector and passed it over the surface of our culture, the needle would swing when he came to our still strong convictions that compassion and justice should be part of social order, that human life is sacred, that marriage and the nurture of children are not one lifestyle among many. When we lack power, we still feel responsible. When we see others suffering, we can still feel pain. These are traces that the Biblical tradition has left deep within our culture: signals of transcendence that can at times move us to otherwise unaccountable acts of conscience and courage." J. Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith*, pp. 92-3.

problems. This was evident even as far back as the 17th century. Take for instance the philosophy of Spinoza, which set out to reform many aspects of traditional Christian theology. Spinoza's criticisms of theology were first and foremost rooted in a moral protest: of all religions consisting of "external ceremonies"; of religious people falling far short of their great ideals; and how in a spirit of piety, they embrace superstitions which oppose science and reason.[30]

As we move inexorably towards a multi-faith global village, traditional religious rivalries seem more and more parochial. Religious people, now more than ever, are challenged to come together in a spirit of fellowship rather than competition. The very credibility of religion in the modern world depends on it. One of the great successes of science lies in the universality of its practice. It is an activity that transcends cultural identity, customs and language. In comparison, religion in the modern world seems to be fundamentally divided. Religions disputing amongst themselves undermine their own respective truth claims. The more people of different faiths vie with one another, the less likely it is that their faith is based upon an infallible authority. As traditional religion in the modern

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[30] "I have often wondered that men who boast of their allegiance to the Christian religion—that is, to love, gladness, peace, continence, and honesty toward all—would contend so unfairly against one another, and indulge daily in the bitterest hate toward one another, so that each man's faith is known more easily from the latter [i.e., his hate] than from the former [i.e., his love, etc.] . For long ago things reached the point where you can hardly know what anyone is, whether Christian, Turk, Jew, or Pagan, except by the external grooming and dress of his body, or because he frequents this or that place of worship, or because he is attached to this or that opinion, or because he is accustomed to swear by the words of some teacher. All lead the same kind of life." "What, then, is the cause of this evil? Doubtless that to ordinary people religion has consisted in regarding the ministry of a church as a position worthy of respect, its offices as sources of income, and its clergy as deserving the highest honor. For as soon as this abuse began in the church, the worst men acquired a great desire to administer the sacred offices; the love of propagating divine religion degenerated into sordid greed and ambition....From this, of course, there had to come great quarrels, envy, and hate, whose violence no passage of time could lesson." "It is no wonder, then, that nothing has remained of the religion that used to be, beyond its external ceremony, by which the people seem more to flatter God than to worship him, no wonder that faith is nothing now but credulity and prejudices. And what prejudices! They turn men from rational beings into beasts, since they completely prevent everyone from using his free judgement and from distinguishing the true from the false, and seem deliberately designed to put out the light of the intellect entirely. Piety – good heavens! – and religion consist in absurd mysteries, and those who scorn reason completely, and reject the intellect as corrupt..." B. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, pp. 8-9.

world comes to terms with secular challenges, it also needs a renewed commitment to fellowship, love, compassion and unity.

5. Challenges for the Bahá'í Community

What are the challenges of secularism for the Bahá'í Faith? On the one hand, the Bahá'í Faith gives strong support to all the major defining features of a secular outlook: free enquiry and freedom of conscience,[31] the necessity of all religious truths being open to scientific investigation,[32] a free exchange of diverse opinions,[33] and the free flow of information.

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[31] "this is a house of worship wherein conscientious opinion has free sway. Every religion and every religious aspiration may be freely voiced and expressed here. Just as in the world of politics there is need for free thought, likewise in the world of religion there should be the right of unrestricted individual belief. Consider what a vast difference exists between modern democracy and the old forms of despotism. Under an autocratic government the opinions of men are not free, and development is stifled, whereas in democracy, because thought and speech are not restricted, the greatest progress is witnessed. It is likewise true in the world of religion. When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail - that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs - development and growth are inevitable. Therefore, this is a blessed church because its pulpit is open to every religion, the ideals of which may be set forth with openness and freedom." 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 197.

[32] "Consider what it is that singles man out from among created beings, and makes of him a creature apart. Is it not his reasoning power, his intelligence? Shall he not make use of these in his study of religion? I say unto 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! Look around and see how the world of today is drowned in superstition and outward forms! ..... 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. To him who has the power of comprehension religion is like an open book, but how can it be possible for a man devoid of reason and intellectuality to understand the Divine Realities of God? 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." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 144-146.

[33] A clash of opinions during Bahá'í consultation is not only welcome, but it is a fundamental prerequisite for arriving at truth: "The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be

On the other hand, there are elements of traditional religious theocracy in the Bahá'í Faith. The individual Bahá'í has clear commitments and responsibilities to the family and the community. Children must be obedient to their parents, and all members of the Bahá'í community must be obedient to their elected assemblies. Although there is no clergy within the Bahá'í Faith, in every locality, members of the Bahá'í community democratically elect nine people who serve on a "Local Spiritual Assembly," an institution that looks after community affairs. Local communities elect the nine people who serve on a National Spiritual Assembly, while national communities elect the nine people who serve on the Universal House of Justice, the highest administrative body of the Bahá'í international community. Bahá'í assemblies are invested with a legislative as well as a moral authority. Bahá'í assemblies are not answerable to the community that elects them.[34] The goal of Bahá'í assemblies is that in time, they will become "Houses of Justice," which

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attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions." `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Wrtings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 87.

[34] "The Administrative Order of the Faith of Baha'u'llah must in no wise be regarded as purely democratic in character inasmuch as the basic assumption which requires all democracies to depend fundamentally upon getting their mandate from the people is altogether lacking in this Dispensation. In the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith, in the enactment of the legislation necessary to supplement the laws of the Kitab-i-Aqdas, the members of the Universal House of Justice, it should be borne in mind, are not, as Baha'u'llah's utterances clearly imply, responsible to those whom they represent, nor are they allowed to be governed by the feelings, the general opinion, and even the convictions of the mass of the faithful, or of those who directly elect them. They are to follow, in a prayerful attitude, the dictates and promptings of their conscience." Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 153-154.

will serve both a political as well as a religious function.[35] The decisions of the Universal House of Justice are infallible and unchallengeable.[36]

In the modern western context, the combination of secular and theocratic ideals of the Bahá'í Faith are not only difficult to understand, but appear contradictory. After all, did modern secularism not arise out of a 500 year history of rebellion against a theocratic institution? The early Protestant reformers resorted to freedom of conscience to challenge the injustice of an infallible authority, surely dissent against injustice is necessary. Has history not shown that no religious institution can place itself beyond truth and justice? Has history not shown that independent investigation, independent enquiry and an independent judicial system are all required if we are to protect ourselves against the all-too-frequent experience of religious people falling far short of their high ideals? Has democracy not replaced theocracy as a viable form of Government? Where in the world is there an example of a successful theocracy? The most recent effort at creating a theocracy was made by the Taliban government in Afghanistan, and that exhibited all the dogmatic and intolerant aspects of religious institutions that modern secularism rightly opposes. Has history not shown that religious institutions are fallible and that they can easily be corrupted? Has history not shown that religion and political power is a

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[35] "He has ordained and established the House of Justice, which is endowed with a political as well as a religious function, the consummate union and blending of church and state. This institution is under the protecting power of Baha'u'llah Himself. A universal, or international, House of Justice shall also be organized. Its rulings shall be in accordance with the commands and teachings of Baha'u'llah, and that which the Universal House of Justice ordains shall be obeyed by all mankind. This international House of Justice shall be appointed and organized from the Houses of Justice of the whole world, and all the world shall come under its administration." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 455.

[36] "The sacred and youthful branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abha Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God. Whoso obeyeth him not, neither obeyeth them, hath not obeyed God; whoso rebelleth against him and against them hath rebelled against God; whoso opposeth him hath opposed God; whoso contendeth with them hath contended with God; whoso disputeth with him hath disputed with God; whoso denieth him hath denied God; whoso disbelieveth in him hath disbelieved in God; whoso deviateth, separateth himself and turneth aside from him hath in truth deviated, separated himself and turned aside from God." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament*, p. 11.

dangerous mix? How can Bahá'ís be successful in building religious institutions when the most influential forces in the modern world have been busy tearing them down? Is it really possible to believe in freedom of conscience and independent enquiry and still aim towards some sort of theocracy?

These are big questions. Perhaps too big at this early stage in the growth of the Bahá'í Faith to consider. The Bahá'í Faith is only some 150 years old, and Bahá'í communities around the world are only just beginning to address some of these issues. One key element in understanding a Bahá'í approach at reconciling modern secular independent thought with traditional religious obedience is the importance given to the act of consultation. The task of building up Bahá'í administrative institutions can only be combined with freedom of conscience and the individual right of self-expression if assembly members serve in "humble fellowship" and are imbued with a spirit of "frank and loving consultation":

> "It devolves upon us whose dearest wish is to see the Cause enter upon that promised era of universal recognition and world achievements, to do all in our power to consolidate the foundations of these Assemblies, promoting at the same time a fuller understanding of their purpose and more harmonious cooperation for their maintenance and success. Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views. If certain instructions of the Master are today particularly emphasized and scrupulously adhered to, let us be sure that they are but provisional measures designed to guard and protect the Cause in its present state of infancy and growth until the day when this tender and precious plant shall have sufficiently grown to be able to withstand the unwisdom of its friends and the attacks of its enemies. Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Baha'i can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice,

> of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candor, and courage on the other."[37]

The "Bahá'í spirit" here is, of course, easy to state as an ideal, but difficult to arrive at in practice. If total obedience is required on the part of the community to their respective assembly, an obvious question is whether Bahá'ís can question the decisions of their assemblies. Is criticism allowable? The answer to this is a qualified yes: yes they can criticise—in fact they have the duty to do so—but it must be done with respect and not in a way that undermines the authority of the Assembly.[38]

What should an individual do if after having put forward his or her criticisms in the spirit of "frank and loving consultation," an Assembly does not change its policy? Should the individual try to lobby support for his or her views from the rest of the Bahá'í community? Should the individual organize a protest? These forms of dissent are quite common in modern secular society, but they are not the Bahá'í way of resolving conflicts. Bahá'ís must give priority to the unity of the community. They are asked not to engage in protest and dissent against the decisions of their

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[37] Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration*, pp. 63-64.

[38] "Now with reference to your last dear letter in which you had asked whether the believers have the right to openly express their criticism of any Assembly action or policy: it is not only the right, but the vital responsibility of every loyal and intelligent member of the Community to offer fully and frankly, but with due respect and consideration to the authority of the Assembly, any suggestion, recommendation or criticism he conscientiously feels he should in order to improve and remedy certain existing conditions or trends in his local Community, and it is the duty of the Assembly also to give careful consideration to any such views submitted to them by any one of the believers. The best occasion chosen for this purpose is the Nineteen Day Feast, which, besides its social and spiritual aspects, fulfils various administrative needs and requirements of the Community, chief among them being the need for open and constructive criticism and deliberation regarding the state of affairs within the local Baha'i Community. But again it should be stressed that all criticisms and discussions of a negative character which may result in undermining the authority of the Assembly as a body should be strictly avoided. For otherwise the order of the Cause itself will be endangered, and confusion and discord will reign in the Community." Letter of 13th December 1939 to an individual believer, Revised November 1990, Shoghi Effendi, Compilation on the *Nineteen Day Feast*, p. 27.

spiritual assemblies. If a mistake has been made, in time, the truth will emerge.[39]

Many details of Bahá'í administration have yet to be worked out in the future,[40] and there are many things that need to happen before a Bahá'í theocracy can emerge. The world at present is struggling to arrive at some form of multi-cultural secularism. If this new form of secularism is to strengthen family unity and provide for community identity, as well as preserve the rights and freedoms of the individual, religion in some form or other is required. Whether the interfaith movement can rise up to this

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[39] "A believer can ask the Assembly why they made a certain decision and politely request them to reconsider. But then he must leave it at that, and not go on disrupting local affairs through insisting on his own views. This applies to an Assembly member as well. We all have a right to our opinions, we are bound to think differently; but a Baha'i must accept the majority decision of his Assembly, realizing that acceptance and harmony - even if a mistake has been made - are the really important things, and when we serve the Cause properly, in the Baha'i way, God will right any wrongs done in the end." From a letter dated 19 October 1947 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, Shoghi Effendi, Compilation on *The Local Spiritual Assemblies*, p. 18.

[40] The infallibility of the Universal House of Justice must be relative and not absolute. It must be some form of restricted infallibility. It cannot for instance extend to matters of science, economics or history. The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, who was appointed the leader of the Bahá'í Faith after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921, defined the scope of his authority: "The infallibility of the Guardian is confined to matters which are related strictly to the Cause and interpretation of the teachings; he is not an infallible authority on other subjects, such as economics, science, etc...." (Shoghi Effendi, *Directives of the Guardian*, p. 33-34). At some point in the future, it will also be necessary for the Universal House of Justice to do the same. But even within matters that relate to the application of Bahá'í principles to the Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice is referred to as primarily a Legislative body. It is given the task of legislating on laws that are not specifically dealt with in the Bahá'í writings: "Those matters of major importance which constitute the foundation of the Law of God are explicitly recorded in the Text, but subsidiary laws are left to the House of Justice. The wisdom of this is that the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Compilation on the *Establishment of The Universal House of Justice*, p. 11). The Universal House of Justice is not, for instance, infallible in its interpretation of the Bahá'í writings. It is inevitable that in its role as spiritual leader of the Bahá'í world international community, it will have to make some interpretation of Bahá'í writings, however, unlike the interpretations of the Guardian (Shoghi Effendi), they are not authoritative. There are many more aspects to the authority of the Universal House of Justice that will need clarification in the future. This matter is discussed in a recent article by Udo Schaeffer entitled, "Infallible Institutions?" *The Bahá'í Studies Review, English Speaking Europe*, Vol. 9, 1999/2000, pp. 17-45.

challenge remains to be seen.[41] Bahá'ís can play a significant role in this process. The Bahá'í Faith has within it both elements of modern secularism and traditional religion. It can in this way serve as a bridge or mediator between the modern West and the world's more traditional religious communities. The Bahá'í writings consistently declare the main purpose of religion to be the creation of love and unity: "the fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men."[42] Bahá'ís must demonstrate that religion can be the cause of bringing together people of diverse backgrounds in a spirit of unity, rather than in conflict. Bahá'ís must build communities that can offer fellowship and love not only to Bahá'ís, but to the world at large. No amount of science, freedom or democracy can do it.

6. Conclusion

This article has examined the secular challenges that religion faces in the world today. It argues that the fundamental aims of secularism are not against the fundamental truths of religion, but have historically derived much of their inspiration from religious ideals. However, parallel to the acquisition of secular values, religions need to regenerate family and community bonds, something which secularism cannot provide. Religious people in the modern day need to return to their age-old goal of bringing a greater measure of peace, love and unity into the world.

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[41] A. Khursheed, "Crossing Religious Boundaries: Interfaith Challenges for the Future," *The Singapore Bahá'í Studies Review, Vol. 4*, No. 1, 1999, pp. 105-189.

[42] Baha'u'llah: *Gleanings*, p. 215. Similarly from 'Abdu'l-Bahá: "All the divine Manifestations have proclaimed the oneness of God and the unity of mankind. They have taught that men should love and mutually help each other in order that they might progress. Now if this conception of religion be true, its essential principle is the oneness of humanity. The fundamental truth of the Manifestations is peace. This underlies all religion, all justice." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 32.

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