

A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE ON NATURE AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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Introduction

The world today is facing many crises - social, political, economic, environmental - all of which are interrelated and are symptomatic of the underlying spiritual ills afflicting humanity. One such crisis that has been less obvious but just as threatening to the future of man is the crisis in the conservation of nature. The natural areas that once clothed the planet are steadily eroding under pressures from a growing population. The rich and the poor both contribute to the problem: the rich through their headlong rush for economic development, and the masses of the poor through their desperate efforts to eke out a living from diminishing resources.

As much as humanity would like to overlook the fact, it is increasingly evident that man depends on the natural systems of the biosphere for its very survival. It has also become alarmingly apparent that, at the present rate of destruction, much of the natural heritage of the earth may be irretrievably lost within a few decades.

The forests are being cleared, soils are washing away, deserts are expanding, fisheries are declining or collapsing, and pollution is spreading. As a result, the wild species that represent most of the earth's genetic resources accumulated over millions of years are being driven in increasing numbers to extinction. As long as significant fragments of natural areas remain to harbour such species, there is always the hope that a wiser and more stable society could maintain and even restore the natural richness of the planet. It is those last fragments of natural ecosystems that are now threatened in many places. When they are gone, many species and potential resources will be lost forever.

These are the indications of a civilization that has gone out of control and is heading for self-destruction.

The Bahá'í teachings place this and other grave problems facing the world today in a broad perspective that both accounts for their origin and suggests practical solutions. Technological progress has confronted the peoples and institutions of the nation states with

the reality of a physically united world, but their behavior and values have yet to adapt to this fundamental change. For the Bahá'ís, therefore, the problem is basically spiritual: all people must come to accept the oneness of mankind as "the first fundamental prerequisite for the reorganization and administration of the world as one country." (1) Without such a spiritual solution, other measures can only be temporary palliatives; solve the fundamental spiritual problem, and the difficulties of the world will begin to yield to practical solutions.

The Bahá'í World View

A scientific assessment of the conservation problem fits easily with the view of the world expressed in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith (1817-1892), and of His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), which reflect the fundamental harmony of science and religion.

The origins of the universe are described in terms that correspond well with present scientific theories, even though written before modern physical and chemical terminologies were developed. "This world of existence, this endless universe, has neither beginning nor end." (2) "That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form thou seest today. The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient." (3) "It may be that one of the parts of the universe, one of the globes, for example, may come into existence, or may be disintegrated, but the other endless globes are still existing; the universe would not be disordered nor destroyed; on the contrary, existence is eternal and perpetual." (4) "In the beginning matter was one, and that one matter appeared in different aspects in each element; thus various forms were produced, and these various aspects as they were produced became permanent, and each element was specialized.... Then these elements became composed, and organized and combined in infinite forms.... From the composition and combination of elements, from their decomposition, from their measure, and from the effect of other beings on them, resulted forms, endless realities, and innumerable beings." (5) "This terrestrial globe having once found existence, grew and developed in the matrix of the universe, and came forth in different forms and conditions, until gradually it attained this present perfection, and became adorned with innumerable beings, and appeared as a finished organization." (6)

Nature is seen as following scientific laws that are themselves the expression of a Divine reality. "Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world." (7) "This nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and to a finished design, from which it will never depart - to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization and are under one law from which they will never depart." (8)

"By nature is meant those inherent properties and necessary relations derived from the realities of things. And these realities of things, though in the utmost diversity, are yet intimately connected one with the other." (9) "If we look with a perceiving eye upon the world of creation, we find that all existing things may be classified as follows: First - Mineral - that is to say matter or substance appearing in various forms of composition. Second - Vegetable - possessing the virtues of the mineral plus the power of augmentation or growth, indicating a degree higher and more specialized than the mineral. Third - Animal - possessing the attributes of the mineral and vegetable plus the power of sense perception. Fourth - Human - the highest specialized organism of visible creation, embodying the qualities of the mineral, vegetable and animal plus an ideal endowment absolutely minus and absent in the lower kingdoms - the power of intellectual investigation into the mysteries

of outer phenomena. The outcome of this intellectual endowment is science which is especially characteristic of man. This scientific power investigates and apprehends created objects and the laws surrounding them. It is the discoverer of the hidden and mysterious secrets of the material universe and is peculiar to man alone. The most noble and praiseworthy accomplishment of man therefore is scientific knowledge and attainment." (10)

The Bahá'í Writings accept the scientific evidence for evolution. However, they make the distinction between the potential for all types of beings, which is inherent in the substance and laws of the creation and has thus always existed, and the process by which that potential is revealed. "As man in the womb of the mother passes from form to form, from shape to shape, changes and develops, and is still the human species from the beginning of the embryonic period - in the same way man, from the beginning of his existence in the matrix of the world, is also a distinct species, that is, man, and has gradually evolved from one form to another." (11) "In the same way the growth and development of all beings is gradual; this is the universal divine organization, and the natural system." (12) "All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees. The organization of God is one." (13) "All these endless beings which inhabit the world, whether man, animal, vegetable, mineral - whatever they may be - are surely, each one of them, composed of elements. There is no doubt that this perfection which is in all beings, is caused by the creation of God from the composing elements, by their appropriate mingling and proportionate quantities, the mode of their composition, and the influence of other beings. For all beings are connected together like a chain, and reciprocal help, assistance, and influence belonging to the properties of things, are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings." (14)

The concepts of essential ecological processes and life support systems also appear in the Bahá'í sacred writings. "Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. In other words, the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness." (15) "In the physical realm of creation, all things are eaters and eaten: the plant drinketh in the mineral, the animal doth crop and swallow down the plant, man doth feed upon the animal, and the mineral devoureth the body of man. Physical bodies are transferred past one barrier after another, from one life to another, and all things are subject to transformation and change, save only the essence of existence itself - since it is constant and immutable, and upon it is founded the life of every species and kind, of every contingent reality throughout the whole of creation." (16)

Man is seen as having a special place in the natural world. "The human body is like animals subject to nature's laws. But man is endowed with a second reality, the rational or intellectual reality; and the intellectual reality of man predominates over nature." (17) "...to man God has given such wonderful power that he can guide, control and overcome nature." (18) "Yet there is a third reality in man, the spiritual reality.... That celestial reality... delivers man from the material world. Its power causes man to escape from nature's world. Escaping, he will find an illuminating reality, transcending the limited reality of man and causing him to attain to the infinitude of God, abstracting him... in the sea of the rays of the Sun of Reality." (19) Man "should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world of nature; for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal, as the struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature." (20)

The above selections from the Bahá'í scriptures, none written more recently than the early years of this century, illustrate the Bahá'í view of the origins of the natural world and of man's place in it. The underlying theme of the interrelationships of all things provides a natural foundation for conservation interest and action. The fact that man can interfere with and control nature also gives him the responsibility to manage nature wisely. However conservation problems are not rooted in any lack of a scientific understanding, they result largely from the social and structural problems in present-day society. The Bahá'í Faith provides social perspectives which are equally important to the problem of the conservation of nature.

An Ever-advancing Civilization

The Bahá'í Faith declares: "All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization." (21) However, the form that progress takes is open to question. In this age when technology has united all the peoples of the world physically and the oneness of the biosphere is recognized, steps must be taken to achieve a corresponding social and political unity.

The injustices that maintain extremes of wealth and poverty and drive the poor to destroy their resources must be resolved through "the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches." (22) Universal education would allow the masses of the people to understand and modify their behavior. At the same time, the inordinate consumption of resources by the wealthy must be controlled.

Bahá'u'lláh warned a hundred years ago about the hazards to the planet of too much material civilization. "The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring evil upon men.... If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation.... The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities..." (23) In a reference that could well apply to nuclear energy but written long before its discovery He wrote: "Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth but they are hidden from the minds and the understanding of men. These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal." (24) The pollution problems of today bear out these warnings. Obviously the civilization of the future must seek out a more moderate balance between material development and the requirements of the natural world.

The necessary changes require fundamental alterations in the structure of human society. "The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples.... The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated....

"A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God

and by its allegiance to one common Revelation - such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving." (25)

Note that such a system would control the entire resources of all the nations, would tap and fully utilize the sources of raw materials and regulate the distribution of products, and would aim to exploit the unused and unsuspected resources and all available sources of energy on the surface of the planet. Only such a system would be able to implement fully a world conservation strategy.

Sustainable development would be fundamental to such a civilization. Unlike the almost exclusive reliance on short-term planning that prevails today, Bahá'u'lláh's vision encompassed the laying the foundations that must last a thousand or thousands of years. The economy of such a society would have to work on a fully-sustainable basis, using renewable or recyclable resources and highly efficient resource utilization.

The Bahá'í Attitude Towards Nature

For Bahá'ís, while nature is not an end in itself to be worshipped and adored (26), the creation does reflect the qualities and attributes of God. "When... thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being.... Then wilt thou observe that the universe is a scroll that discloseth His hidden secrets, which are preserved in the well-guarded Tablet. And not an atom of all the atoms in existence, not a creature from amongst the creatures but speaketh His praise and telleth of His attributes and names, revealeth the glory of His might and guideth to His oneness and His mercy....

"And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Day-Star's splendours, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them." (27)

The contemplation of nature thus has a spiritual significance for Bahá'ís. Indeed the spiritual, social and physical environments of man are all interrelated. "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 also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions." (28)

The genetic diversity that underlies the richness of living things is thus a reflection of the qualities of God. Bahá'ís are encouraged to appreciate such diversity, whether in man or in the natural world. "Consider the world of created beings, how varied and diverse they are in species, yet with one sole origin. All the differences that appear are those of outward form and colour.

"This diversity of type is apparent throughout the whole of nature.... Let us look... at the beauty in diversity, the beauty of harmony, and learn a lesson from the vegetable creation. If you behold a garden in which all the plants were the same as to form, colour and perfume, it would not seem beautiful to you at all, but, rather, monotonous and dull. The garden which is pleasing to the eye and which makes the heart glad, is the garden in which are growing side by side flowers of every hue, form and perfume, and the joyous contrast of colour is what makes for charm and beauty. So is it with trees. An orchard full of fruit trees is a delight; so is a plantation planted with many species of shrubs. It is just the diversity and variety that

constitutes its charm; each flower, each tree, each fruit, beside being beautiful in itself, brings out by contrast the qualities of the others, and shows to advantage the special loveliness of each and all." (29)

Respect for the natural world and moderation in the use of its resources are also reflected in the Bahá'í prohibition of cruelty to animals and warnings about hunting to excess. "Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature.... The feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast.

"Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. If an animal be sick, let the children try to heal it, if it be hungry, let them feed it, if thirsty, let them quench its thirst, if weary, let them see that it rests." (30)

'Abdu'l-Bahá said of his father during His imprisonment: "Bahá'u'lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: 'I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.'" (31) Once Bahá'u'lláh was free to leave the prison, He often used to pitch His tent among the trees on the slope of Mount Carmel.

In many religions including the Bahá'í Faith, the founders or leaders have retired to the wilderness for meditation and contemplation prior to taking on the burdens of their message, or for spiritual renewal. Bahá'u'lláh spent two years in the mountains, where "the birds of the air were My companions and the beasts of the field My associates." (32) and Shoghi Effendi, the late Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, found for himself a partial healing from the weight of his responsibilities high in the Swiss Alps. (33)

Bahá'ís thus approach nature with an awareness of the interrelatedness of themselves and the natural world, with an indication of the importance of all the world's resources for the civilization they are building, and the example of their leaders showing the spiritual and aesthetic values of wilderness, the countryside, and the diversity of natural life.

World Conservation Strategy

The goals of the World Conservation Strategy to maintain essential ecological processes and life support systems, to preserve genetic diversity, and to ensure the sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems as the basis for sustainable development are fully in accord with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. But as with many global undertakings in today's fragmented world, the strategy suffers from the lack of world-scale institutions capable of implementing it. Action at the national level will never be more than a partial solution to world problems. The establishment of the world commonwealth anticipated in the Bahá'í writings will finally make world management and conservation of the resources of the biosphere possible.

In the meantime, many Bahá'ís have long demonstrated individually their personal and even professional commitment to goals of conservation and environmental protection, Bahá'í communities are active in tree plantings and other environmental activities, and the Bahá'í International Community participates in various world environmental events such as those sponsored by United Nations agencies.

As local Bahá'í communities around the world become increasingly involved in their own social and economic development, the principles of conservation-based rural development outlined in the World Conservation Strategy will be highly relevant to their efforts. Once local people are educated to the need for wise management of their resources, they will be able through consultation to plan and implement their own conservation activities.

As this paper has indicated, Bahá'ís see the problem of conservation of nature as including spiritual as well as material dimensions. "There are spiritual principles, or what some call human values, by which solutions can be found for every social problem. Any well-intentioned group can in a general sense devise practical solutions to its problems, but good intentions and practical knowledge are usually not enough. The essential merit of spiritual principle is that it not only presents a perspective which harmonizes with that which is inherent in human nature, it also induces an attitude, a dynamic, a will, an aspiration, which facilitate the discovery and implementation of practical measures. Leaders of governments and all in authority would be well served in their efforts to solve problems if they would first seek to identify the principles involved and then be guided by them." (34) Some of the spiritual principles underlying nature conservation have been outlined above. Religion can be a powerful motivating force for putting those principles into action.

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