

## **An Introduction to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s The Secret of Divine Civilization**

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*The Secret of Divine Civilization* is a masterpiece in social and political theory. Although written in 19<sup>th</sup> century regarding the question of modernization of Iran, its vision is not outdated. On the contrary, the questions addressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s book have become even more urgent and relevant for humanity at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The vision of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers a novel perspective for a new world order, one which is qualitatively different from all existing models of political theory. Consequently, an adequate reading of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s treatise requires a dynamic perspective which is oriented simultaneously to both the specific conditions of Iran in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the problems and problematics confronting humanity at the present time. This is due to the fact that while *The Secret of Divine Civilization* is written in response to the specific conditions of Iranian society in 19<sup>th</sup> century, its theoretical vision transcends the boundaries of both Iran and 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is truly a work for all humanity and all seasons.

In this brief introduction of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s historic text I will first briefly discuss the purpose and the historical context of the writing of *The Secret*. Therefore, I will locate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s treatise in the context of both Iranian social and political situation, and the overall message of the Bahá’í Faith. After that I would explicate the organization of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s treatise and differentiate four levels of discourse in His work. The next four sections will be devoted to those four levels of discourse. The first level would address the debate concerning traditionalist patrimonialism and rationalist bureaucratization. The second debate is oriented to the controversy between religious traditionalism and atheist rationalism. The third layer is devoted to the historicist as opposed to the objectivist definitions of social and economic development. Finally, the fourth debate will address the question of nationalism and internationalism. This introduction will be concluded by a brief discussion of the concept of modernity in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision.

### **1. The context and purpose of The Secret**

*The Secret of Divine Civilization* is one of the early writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá which occupies a unique theoretical and historical position among the Bahá’í sacred writings. Unlike general Bahá’í Writings, *The Secret* is addressed to the Muslim population of Iran, written as an anonymous Muslim text, devoted to a sociological analysis of the conditions of socioeconomic development of Iranian society, and aimed at a general theory of development and modernity which transcends and combines the two opposing theories of conservative traditionalism and technocratic rationalism. It argues for a new approach to modernity and rationality which harmonizes science and spiritual values in the context of a historical and international approach to culture and society.

It becomes obvious that *The Secret* must be viewed simultaneously as an expression of the inspired vision of the Bahá’í Faith on the one hand, and Iranian intellectual social and political discourse on the other. What makes this particular text unique is precisely the intersection of these two currents. The inspired character of *The Secret* implies that the message of this text is qualitatively different from secular debates on the issue of social and economic development and that its vision is not limited to the particular situation of 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. On the other hand, it is directly addressing the fundamental questions of modernity and development from an explicitly sociological point of view, offering explicit and specific solutions to the cultural, economic,

political, spiritual, and moral chaos of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. A similar chaos and confusion is also bewildering our own generation at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century in all different parts of the world.

Since I will concentrate on the context and content of *The Secret* as a sociological and political theory of development and modernity, it is also necessary to make a brief reference at this point to the relation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text to the overall vision and culture of the Bahá’í Faith.

#### ***A. The Secret in the context of Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation***

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the Son and Successor of the Founder of the Bahá’í Faith, Bahá’u’lláh. Beginning in 1853, Bahá’u’lláh revealed a new Divine message for humanity. He was born in Iran but was banished by the order of Iranian Qajar monarch, Nasiri’d-Din Shah, to the Ottoman empire. He passed away in exile in 1892. In His writings, Bahá’u’lláh declared that humanity has now reached the age of adolescence and must strive to attain the stage of maturity. This coming of age of humanity will be realized through fundamental spiritual, cultural, economic, and political transformations in the world. Bahá’u’lláh’s message was in fact a Divine guidance for this process of regeneration and reconstruction. For this reason, the vision of the Bahá’í Faith is not simply a moral guidance devoid of social and institutional relevance. Nor it is simply a sociological or political theory. On the contrary, it represents a holistic and global approach which links spiritual truth to individual life, collective institutions, and an emerging new world order.

Bahá’u’lláh’s metaphysics is a metaphysics of love and unity. He affirmed three fundamental essential unities at different levels of being. First, He proclaimed the absolute unity of divine reality. The unity of divine reality, however, is beyond the capacity of human understanding and conceptual framework. Even the categories of oneness and plurality are incapable of expressing the unknowable divine unity. But this divine reality is the foundation and ultimate purpose of all beings including the humans. In other words, in a sense the being of humans is nothing but a reflection of that divine reality and a longing and love for recognition and attainment of God. The solution of this fundamental antinomy of human existence, Bahá’u’lláh argued, is the revelation of the Divine in His supreme Manifestations in each age. For the Bahá’ís, all beings are signs and indications of the divine. Human mind can only understand the realm of the appearance, the realm of manifestations, the realm of the phenomena. However, by divine decree there is a mediation between God and humans. This is the realm of supreme Manifestations of God in whom the invisible becomes visible. These are the Prophets of God Who appear in each age in accordance with the stage of human development to exemplify the highest perfection of the humanity and the actualization of the divine sign which is latent in all humanity. Therefore, the ultimate meaning and the fulfillment of human destiny are realized through the recognition of the supreme Manifestation of God in each age.

The second level of unity is precisely related to the realm of the Manifestations of God. According to Bahá’u’lláh, all Divine Messengers and Prophets—like Krishna, Buddha, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá’u’lláh—are in fact one and the same essence. Bahá’u’lláh talked of the unity of all Manifestations of God and the unity of all religions. He argued that the truth and the purpose of all religions are the same. Divine revelation is one but it takes different forms in accordance with the stage of development of human cultures and their specific historical and social needs. The teachings of all religions therefore are equally valid and true. Divine Messengers, Bahá’u’lláh told us, are spiritual Physicians Who prescribe different medicine depending on the

specific illness of Their patients. All the medicines are equally necessary for the well-being of humanity. However, these medicines must change in accordance with the change in illness. It is for this reason that Bahá'u'lláh talked about “progressive revelation” while emphasizing the unity of divine revelation. Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh used the metaphor of the sun and horizons to convey the same idea. The Divine Reality of all different Manifestations of God is one and the same, like the same sun which appears each time from a different horizon. Therefore, what differentiates Jesus and Buddha is not Their essential Reality but only Their human appearance. They are different Horizons from which the same Divine Reality is shining over the hearts of humanity. Bahá'u'lláh's message therefore initiated a revolution in religious thought and practice. He simultaneously eliminated the causes of religious discord and rejected religious traditionalism, arguing for the thesis of progressive revelation and the renewal of divine teaching corresponding to the stage of the development of human culture. We have here a religious outlook which is both a metaphysics of love and a metaphysics of sociocultural progress and advancement.

Following the two previous levels of unity, Bahá'u'lláh also spoke of the unity of humankind. The unity of human kind is a metaphysical and essential reality and truth. It means that all humans are endowed with the reflection of divine attributes in their beings. Human soul is a mirror of divine attributes. For that reason, humanity is in fact a mirror of divine unity and as such a sacred reality. The task of humanity, therefore, is to purify the mirror of their existence so that the divine unity will become visible at individual, social, cultural, economic, political, and intellectual levels of human reality. In other words, the realization of the divine in human life is not conditioned on flight from social and cultural life and avoidance from participation in the advancement of human civilization. On the contrary, the divine essence of humanity can only be realized through history, human civilization, and social progress. Therefore, the spiritual challenge of humanity is to create moral, spiritual, social, economic, and political culture and institutions which make it possible that the latent sacred unity of humankind would be realized in their actual life and in the midst of the diversity of individuals and cultures. This unity in diversity is itself a historical process. Up to the present, the unity of humanity had been expressed only in limited and particularistic ways. National unity, so far, has been the ultimate achievement of human unity. However, Bahá'u'lláh teaches us, it is now the historic mission of humanity to achieve the oneness of humankind in a global stage and in a higher form of culture and institutions which would reflect the equality and unity of all human beings. Bahá'u'lláh's concept of the coming of age is precisely this same process of the manifestation of love and unity at global institutional level.

As we can see the entire structure of Bahá'í belief is one of unity in diversity which is aimed at the realization of the oneness of humankind. Bahá'u'lláh's vision of this emerging global order is captured in His call for a “New World Order”. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's analysis of modernity and development is a sociological and political extension of this same concept. For that reason, it is useful to look at the meaning of this term briefly. Of course, the details of Bahá'u'lláh's concept of the new world order is beyond the scope of this short introduction. In fact, the entire teachings and principles of the Bahá'í Faith is oriented towards this complex concept. But it is necessary to explicate the philosophical and sociological premises underlying His terminology. Indeed, a brief glimpse at the terms of this concept reveals the fundamental characteristics of Bahá'í social theory. At the same time, such an analysis makes it clear that the Bahá'í concept of new world order is qualitatively different from the recent use of the same term in political writings of some of the contemporary politicians and writers.

The concept of the new world order is composed of three terms each of which are indispensable for understanding the Bahá'í concept of history, culture, and society. The first term is order. In fact Bahá'u'lláh has frequently written on the social and spiritual conditions of order. As we will see 'Abdu'l-Bahá also deals with the question of order in *The Secret* explicitly. The question of order is indeed the fundamental question of political and social theory. The reason for this is not difficult to understand. The mere fact of social life and collective organization requires some sort of order regulating the behavior of the individuals in society. No society is possible without order, or to say it differently, order is a fundamental condition of the possibility of society. It is for this reason that the question of order was precisely the first systematic question of modern Western political theory. Modern political theory is associated with Thomas Hobbes' political writings during the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The question posed by Hobbes is normally called the Hobbesian problem of order. Hobbes in his famous book *Leviathan* investigated the basis of order in society. According to Hobbes human beings are naturally selfish, aggressive, and concerned with the pursuit of their interests.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, Hobbes argued, in the state of nature humans will use any means to get what they want, and they will not refrain from stealing or murder. Consequently, in the state of nature there can be no order. There would be perpetual war of all against everyone else. Such a life is insecure, brutish, and short lived.

Hobbes' solution to the problem of order is again rooted in his definition of human nature. Humans are for Hobbes selfish and yet rational. By the term rational Hobbes means that people will try to maximize their pleasure and minimize their costs. In other words, rational people will follow their selfish interests efficiently and effectively. Since humans are rational, they understand that the state of nature is harmful to them and contradicts their interests. Therefore because of their selfishness humans decide to engage in a social contract in order to create laws and political institutions so that the fear of punishment by a strong and dictatorial state will prevent selfish individuals from committing criminal acts. Order, therefore, is the product of the fear of punishment and coercion. Hobbesian theory inspired the philosophy of the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although the philosophers of the Enlightenment disagreed with the dictatorial form of Hobbesian state, they maintained and affirmed the basic principles of his theory of order. Order in other words was believed to be based upon a combination of rational selfishness of humans and their fear of legal punishment. The inadequacy of this rationalistic conception of order became increasingly evident in 19<sup>th</sup> century sociology and political theory. Modern social and political theory not only affirmed the normative and symbolic character of human action and motivation, but also reconceptualized the relation of individuals in society in terms of new ideas like solidarity, common bond, common religion, shared values, shared culture, legitimacy, and normative integration. Hobbesian solution to the problem of order was not sufficient.

Bahá'u'lláh's concept of order should be understood in terms of this theoretical problem. In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh emphasized that system of reward and punishment is the necessary but not the sufficient condition for the maintenance of order in society. According to Bahá'u'lláh order requires not only reward and punishment but also internalized moral values, religious belief, and love of humanity. It is for that reason that Bahá'u'lláh's analysis of the concept of order was directly opposed to the Western Enlightenment's concept of order. For the latter, human reason and his selfish orientation guarantee social order. Therefore, there is no need for religion and divine guidance in human life. In other words, Enlightenment's theory of order was a total rejection of religion and spiritual values. Bahá'u'lláh, on the other hand, conceives of the question of order as a proof for the need for religion and divine revelation in human history. For instance, He wrote:

In formulating the principles and laws a part hath been devoted to penalties which form an effective instrument for the security and protection of men. However, dread of penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God. It is man's true protector and his spiritual guardian.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere He wrote:

In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil. Should the lamp of the religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquility and peace cease to shine.<sup>3</sup>

In His other writings, Bahá'u'lláh calls on His believers to observe divine law and commandments because of their love for divine beauty. Now we can see the meaning of the term order in the concept of new world order. Bahá'u'lláh is arguing that human social order must be based upon not only scientific and instrumental rationality but also moral principles and divine guidance.

However, Bahá'u'lláh is not content with simply a theory of order. His concept of order is always accompanied by another equally important concept. He talks about a new order. This other term affirms Bahá'u'lláh's concept of historical change and progress. The philosophers of the Enlightenment attacked traditional religious theories of order because they revolted against traditionalism. In traditional religious discussion of order, it was argued that human social order should remain unchangeable because of the unchangeable will of God. In other words, the religious leaders affirmed the need for religion in order to protect past traditions and oppose historical dynamics. Bahá'u'lláh's concept of new world order is exactly the opposite. Bahá'u'lláh argued that religion should be a cause of spiritual and social advancement and progress of humanity. In Bahá'u'lláh's view, every age has its own problems and needs and, therefore, religious teachings should also be renewed in each new stage of human cultural advancement. The will of God is in accordance with this dynamic advancement of human journey towards an ever-increasing unity and progress. That is why Bahá'u'lláh spoke of progressive revelation. Social order should be guided by religious teachings and divine guidance, but the teachings of religion should itself be renewed by a new revelation which would correspond to the conditions and needs of humanity in its new stage of development. In other words, Bahá'u'lláh combines order and progress in His spiritual political theory. Religion becomes a dynamic force for the advancement of humanity and not a reactionary force against progressive civilization. He wrote:

The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions can never be the same as that which the subsequent age may require. Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements. We can well perceive how the whole human race is encompassed with great, with incalculable afflictions. We see it languishing on its bed of sickness, sore-tried and disillusioned. They that are intoxicated by self-conceit have interposed themselves between it and the Divine and infallible Physician. Witness how

they have entangled all men, themselves included, in the mesh of their devices. They can neither discover the cause of the disease, nor have they any knowledge of the remedy. They have conceived the straight to be crooked, and have imagined their friend an enemy. Incline your ears to the sweet melody of this Prisoner. Arise, and lift up your voices, that haply they that are fast asleep may be awakened. Say: O ye who are as dead! The Hand of Divine bounty proffereth unto you the Water of Life. Hasten and drink your fill. Whoso hath been re-born in this Day, shall never die; whoso remaineth dead shall never live.<sup>4</sup>

In the language of social theory Bahá'u'lláh's dynamic and historical approach to social reality is usually designated by the term historical consciousness. Therefore, the adjective new in the concept of new world order is in fact an affirmation of the historical consciousness.

However, Bahá'u'lláh's vision is more clearly understandable when we pay attention to the third term of His new world order. In fact, this third term follows from Bahá'u'lláh's historical consciousness. Since society and culture are dynamic phenomena, and because the form of spirituality, culture, and social order should correspond with the stage of the development of humanity, the present social order must take a global character. That is why Bahá'u'lláh talks affirms a new world order. The basic premise of Bahá'u'lláh's concept is that any solution for the major problems confronting humanity at the present time is dependent on the adoption of a global approach and an international method of problem solving. In other words, humanity now has arrived at a new stage in which nationalistic and militaristic solutions are inadequate for solving fundamental challenges of human race in the modern world. Issues like environmental pollution, world hunger, nuclear war, and global inequality of opportunities for education, occupation, income, and access to resources can only be resolved if humanity sees itself as members of one family and an interdependent organic unity. It is for these reasons that Bahá'u'lláh has always declared the realization of the oneness of humanity as the ultimate goal of His revelation. He wrote:

The evidences of discord and malice are apparent everywhere, though all were made for harmony and union. The Great Being saith: O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.<sup>5</sup>

Now it is possible to have a general sense of Bahá'u'lláh's vision. He simultaneously affirms three principles for the regeneration of a just and advancing social order. First, material culture and spiritual culture should be harmonized. Secondly, both material and spiritual aspects of culture should be dynamic and progressive, corresponding with the stage of human development and the concrete needs of humanity at each stage of its civilization. Third, at present time both spiritual and material cultures must assume a global approach for solving the emerging problems of humanity. Indeed, the combination of these three principles provide us with an outline of Bahá'u'lláh's message.

Bahá'u'lláh passed away in 1892. Since His religion was oriented to love and unity, He made a covenant with His believers so that the question of leadership of His Faith would not become a cause of discord and schism. Therefore, He explicitly appointed His Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as His successor and authorized interpreter of His writings. *The Secret of Divine Civilization* is one of the early writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá written by the order of Bahá'u'lláh, 17 years before the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh. An adequate understanding of *The Secret* requires an extensive analysis of the

totality of the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. While I cannot discuss ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s other writings in this brief introduction, it is necessary to note His warnings to the world during His trip to the West in the years between 1911 and 1913. At a time that America was torn by racial injustice and discrimination, and Europe was moving towards a devastating world war due to ethnic and nationalistic prejudices, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called for racial unity and elimination of all prejudices. He called for equal rights of men and women and warned humanity that justice, peace, and human advancement is dependent on harmony and equal rights of men and women. At a time that education was a privilege of a rich minority, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called for universal and obligatory education of all children of the world. At a time of confusion between unbridled competitive capitalism and violent labor movements, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called for social justice and elimination of extremes of wealth and poverty. Criticizing both religious traditionalists and arrogant atheists, He affirmed the harmony of religion, science, and reason, and declared that religion should be a cause of unity and concord and not hatred and discord. He called for independent investigation of truth by all humans, and affirmed the need for world peace and oneness of humanity as the most urgent questions confronting humanity. He called for unity in diversity and argued for a universal auxiliary language to promote communication, understanding, and unity of the world. Needless to say, these ideas were expressed by Bahá’u’lláh and elaborated and interpreted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

*The Secret of Divine Civilization* is inspired by the same principles and vision of Bahá’u’lláh. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá applies these principles in His text through an analysis of the fundamental questions of modernity and socioeconomic development. *The Secret* was written in 1875. The date of writing is explicitly mentioned in the text itself. He writes:

For example at this writing, in the year 1292 A.H. (1875) they have invented a new rifle in Germany and a bronze cannon in Austria.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to know that it was Bahá’u’lláh Who asked His Son to write this treatise. In one of His tablets, Bahá’u’lláh mentions that He asked ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to write some pages on the means and the cause of development and underdevelopment of the world in order to reduce the prejudices of the dogmatic conservatives.<sup>7</sup> In reading *The Secret* one notes the interesting apparent paradox that Bahá’u’lláh called for an explication of the conditions for development of the world, whereas apparently ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s book is oriented towards the question of the socioeconomic development of Iran. But in fact there is no contradiction here. On the contrary this apparent paradox is the key for understanding ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concepts of modernity and development which will be discussed later. But before discussing the organization and the content of *The Secret* we should also locate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text in the sociopolitical situation of Iran in the second half of 19th century.

### ***B. The Secret in the context of 19th century Iran***

19<sup>th</sup> century Iran, like most other parts of the world, was a century of fundamental social, political, and cultural transformations. During this century, Iran was ruled by Qajar kings, and for most of the second half of the century the Qajar king Nasiri’d-Din Shah was the reigning monarch. The most important development of this century was the growing recognition by Iranians of the emergence of a new international balance of power and the declining and inferior position of Iran in economic, political, and military affairs. The balance of power in military, political, technological, economic, and cultural creativity and innovation had changed in favour of the



Europeans and against the Islamic societies including Iran. 1,000 years earlier, with the emergence of Islam, a vast Islamic empire came in to existence which initiated cultural creativity, technological invention, economic prosperity, and military might. Medieval Islamic culture was equal or superior to the Western culture during up until the 15<sup>th</sup> century. After centuries of cultural, economic, military, and technological victory and progress, Islamic empires forgot the spirit of Islam and became obsessed with a literalistic, conservative, and traditionalistic approach to religion and society. This conservative orientation discouraged the spirit of individual autonomy, cultural creativity, and scientific innovation. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the old Islamic cultural superiority was replaced with social and cultural stagnation. At the same time, religious, scientific, democratic, industrial, and cultural reforms and revolutions of the West created powerful European states who, influenced by their new nationalistic and capitalistic institutions, initiated a process of global conquest and colonialism.

While the Ottoman empire had recognized the need for sociopolitical reform in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Iranian political and religious leaders ignored the revolutionary developments in the world. It was only after the two successive defeats in war with neighboring Russia and the signing of humiliating treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkaman Chai (1828), and the later defeat in Herat (1856) from England that the questions of modernity and reform became relevant issues in Iranian political and ideological discourse. None of the attempts at institutional reform, however, were successful. This was due to both internal and external reasons. Internally, lack of a clear vision of cultural reform and rationalization was one of the causes of the failure of the reform attempts. A call for reform was prevalent among secular Iranian intellectuals in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, but these were usually content with superficial changes and lacked holistic and historical orientation. The other cause of the failure of reform initiatives was the vehement opposition of the conservative Muslim clergy ('ulama) to the culture of modernity and institutional rationalization. Rejecting the spirit of modernity, the conservative 'ulama adopted a traditionalistic reaction against structural and cultural transformations occurring in the world. They insisted that modernity is opposed to the dictates of Islam. Unfortunately, the power of the 'ulama was increasing in this period, and they exerted tremendous political and cultural power. Unable to compete with modern production, transportation, and finance methods of the West, a process of deindustrialization took place in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. Traditional handicraft industry declined and Iranian economy became heavily dependent on imports from the West. In general, 19<sup>th</sup> century was a century of economic decline for Iran.

Two other internal causes for the failure of reform attempts should also be mentioned. First, the pervasive dominance of corruption among Qajar kings and princes, bureaucratic officials, and religious authorities paralyzed the reform process. Secondly, the Bábí religious movement which offered a new cultural and spiritual vision for society was brutally persecuted by both Qajar state and conservative religious 'ulama. It was the Bábí movement which heralded the advent of Bahá'u'lláh. The Báb Himself was executed in 1850 in Iran.

However, the internal cultural stagnation was not the only cause of the failure of the policies of reform. The coupling of aggressive nationalism and relentless capitalism created imperialist Western states who were engaged in oppressive and militaristic foreign policies that undermined sustainable socioeconomic development and cultural creativity in the rest of the world. In fact, the strategic significance of Iran led to significant rivalry among foreign forces to expand their influence in the country.



‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *The Secret* provided a comprehensive model of institutional and cultural rationalization. It analyzed the dynamics of development and underdevelopment in the light of 19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian society. His vision, however, was qualitatively unique because it was inspired by Bahá’u’lláh’s concept of a new world order.

## 2. Organization of the text and layers of discourse in *The Secret*

It is difficult to translate the title of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text in any language. The reason for this is the subtle and beautiful play with the words in the title. The literal translation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text is “The Divine Secrets concerning the causes of civilization” (*Asraru’l-Qaybiyya li-Asbab-i-Madaniyyah*). However, this translation is not adequate. The term *Qaybiyya* which is translated as divine has in fact a double meaning which is masterly used by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The first meaning of the term *Qaybiyya* refers to the anonymity of the author of the text. It was prevalent in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian literature to write works of social and political criticism anonymously without revealing the identity of the author. The author of the text remained invisible. For instance the first and the most famous book calling for reform of Iranian administration was written in 1858 by Iranian secular intellectual, Malkum Khan, who called his book *Kitabchiy-i-Qaybiyyah*, meaning the anonymous booklet. However, the term *Qaybiyya*, which literally means invisible, implies a second meaning as well. Referring to the realm of the invisible divine reality, *Qaybiyya* is also equivalent with the term divine. For Malkum Khan the term *Qaybiyya* implied only anonymity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, was not just an ordinary intellectual. His vision was inspired by the revelation of His father, and therefore His text was inspired by divine guidance. Now we can see the double meaning of the term *Qaybiyya* in the title of the book. On the one hand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not reveal the identity of His text, and on the other hand He does reveal it by emphasizing the divine source of His inspiration. The English common translation of the text, namely *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, is a good approximation for the original complex title of the work.

In the early pages of *The Secret* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the reasons for both writing the book and anonymity of the author. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text is addressed to the king, people, clergy, officials, and secular intellectuals of Iran. He tries to move all segments of Iranian society towards a new vision of modernity, institutional reform, and sociocultural rationalization. He argues that He is writing the book because the king of Iran (Nasiri’d-Din Shah) has recently expressed interest in social and political modernization of Iranian society. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out that His previous silence on the issue had been due to the fact that the king had not been seriously concerned with the development and progress of Iran. Now that the King has defended the policy of cultural reform and rationalization, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues, it is His moral duty to discuss the question of advancement and development of Iran. He writes:

Not until now had we seen a monarch, holding in his capable hands the reigns of affairs, and on whose high resolve the welfare of all his subjects depends, exerting as it would befit him, like a benevolent father, his efforts towards the training and cultivation of his people, seeking to insure their well-being and peace of mind, and exhibiting due concern for their interests; this servant and those like him have therefore remained silent. Now, however, it is clear to the discerning that the Shah has of his own accord determined to establish a just government and to secure the progress of all his subjects. His honorable intention has consequently evoked this present statement.<sup>8</sup>

Explaining the anonymous character of His writing, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

As is clear to the discerning, the writer has for this reason felt it necessary to put down, for the sake of God alone and as a tribute to this high endeavour, a brief statement on certain urgent questions. To demonstrate that his one purpose is to promote the general welfare, he has withheld his name. Since he believes that guidance towards righteousness is in itself a righteous act, he offers these few words of counsel to his countries sons, words spoken for God’s sake alone and in the spirit of a faithful friend. Our Lord, Who knows all things, bears witness that this servant seeks nothing but what is right and good; for he, a wonderer in the desert of God’s love, has come into a realm where the hand of denial or assent, of praise or blame, can touch him not.<sup>9</sup>

In reading the above statement one can see a subtle reference to the fact that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was an Iranian in exile, Who continued to care about Iranians and whose message was inspired by spiritual values and not political interests.

Although in its Persian edition there is no apparent division of *The Secret* into different chapters, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s tablet can be divided into five main chapters. In His introductory chapter (1-12) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá contrasts the past glory of Iran with its current state of backwardness, and calls for institutional and cultural rationalization and modernization in all dimensions of Iranian society. After emphasizing the need for socioeconomic rationalization, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concludes the first chapter by listing four prevalent objections against reform and modernization. He writes:

Some say that these are newfangled methods and foreign isms, quite unrelated to the present needs and the time-honored customs of Persia. Others...tell...that theses modern methods are the practices of heathen peoples, and are contrary to the venerated canons of true Faith... One group insists that such reforms should go forward with great deliberation, step by step, haste being inadmissible. Another maintains that only such measures should be adopted as the Persians themselves devise... Every faction in short, follows its own particular illusion.<sup>10</sup>

The next four chapters of *The Secret* are devoted to analysis and refutation of these four objections. Therefore, the second chapter (12-25) rejects the thesis that modernity is opposed to the spirit and conditions of Iranian society and that Iranians should only follow their traditions. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that there are some universal preconditions of modernity and cultural rationalization which are indispensable to any process of advancement in the current stage of sociohistorical development of the world. In the third chapter (25-107) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejects the conservative assertion of the traditionalist ‘ulama who equated modernity with atheism, heresy, and rejection of Islam. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that true Islam is in fact compatible with modernity and that the spirit of Islam requires historical adaptability and cultural innovation. This chapter is the longest part of the text because of the theoretical and political significance of the question. After rejecting the clerical rejection of modernity, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá criticizes secular intellectuals’ fascination with the West, and attacks Western militarism, materialism, and the neglect of spiritual values. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá criticizes philosophy of the Enlightenment’s concept of modernity at this point. The fourth chapter (107-112) rejects the incremental approach to rationalization while it affirms the principle of cultural gradualism and wisdom. Finally, the last chapter responds to the fourth objection which is another variant of the first one.

Throughout the text ‘Abdu’l-Bahá offers a new vision of modernity and development which is quite different from the prevalent theories of modernity and development both in 10<sup>th</sup> century Iran and 20<sup>th</sup> century social and political theory. In the next sections of this introduction I will examine the substantive ideas of *The Secret* in more detail. But a glimpse of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision is visible even in the opening page of the book. From the first paragraph it is evident that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concept of modernity is defined in terms of the application of reason to sociocultural life:

Praise and thanksgiving be unto Providence that out of all realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and honored it with intellect (danish) and wisdom (hush), the two most luminous lights in either world. Through the agency of this great endowment, He has in every epoch cast on the mirror of creation new and wonderful configurations.<sup>11</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s distinction between “danish” and “wisdom” is not accidental. For Him, an adequate process of rationalization must be aimed at not only instrumental and scientific rationalization (danish) but also moral and practical rationalization (hush). For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, reason is precisely the combination and harmony of the two distinct processes of rationalization. That is why He immediately links His concept of reason with divine intellect or revelation:

This supreme emblem of God stands first in the order of creation and first in rank, taking precedence over all created things. Witness to it is the Holy Tradition, “Before all else, God created reason.”<sup>12</sup>

An adequate discussion of the term “reason” mentioned in the Islamic holy tradition is beyond the scope of this introduction. Suffice it to say that this reason as the first creation of God is nothing but the divine primal Will, which is identical with the essence of Divine Manifestation of God. In other words, by reason here is meant not only scientific knowledge but divine revelation as well. The message of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is already clear: true modernity requires not only scientific, technological, and instrumental rationalization but spiritual, cultural, and moral rationalization as well.

In order to understand the substantive content of *The Secret*, we should explicate four different layers of discourse which are present in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s work. These four levels are not formally distinguished from each other because of complex interrelations among the four levels. However, the reader should distinguish them because they are integral to the entire text. It should be noted that these four layers of discourse are independent from the four objections against modernity which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá evaluates. The four levels are the key for understanding ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concept of modernity and development. They deal with different debates and questions. Looking at these different debates one can see a progressive movement towards abstraction, generalization, and globalization. It becomes evident that while *The Secret* is related to specific questions of development in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, its message is far more general and universal.

The first layer of discourse is directly related to the specific political and cultural developments in the decade of the 1870s. The year 1875, the year of the writing of *The Secret*, was the midpoint in the most important decade of political and social reform attempt in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. During this decade, there was a battle between two opposite forces in terms of the future direction of Iran’s social, economic, and political structures. The advocates of reform were led by Husayn Khan (Mushiru’d-Dawlih) who called for a centralized legal and bureaucratic state. The opponents of

reform were defending the semi-feudal patrimonial privileges of big landlords who were mostly Qajar princes and conservative religious leaders. The king of Iran, Nasiri'd-Din Shah, was ambivalent between the two groups. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *The Secret* is partly an attempt to address this crucial political development of the decade. In this sense, one can define the first level of discourse in terms of the debate between the two theories of patrimonial traditionalism and bureaucratic rationalism.

The second debate addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's work is related to the prevalent debate between secular intellectuals and traditionalist conservative 'ulama. The fundamental question here was concerned with the relation of Islam to society, and the relation of religion to modernity and development. For secular intellectuals, the development of Iran required rejection of Islam, and adoption of a rationalistic atheistic outlook. For conservative 'ulama, on the other hand, rejection of modernity and return to original Islam was the only solution to Iran's problems.

The third debate, and one of the most important ones, is related to the definition and nature of the concept of development. Here we are dealing with a dilemma which is faced by almost all parts of the world in our own time as well. The two sides of this debate can be called traditionalist/historicist and rationalist/objectivist theories of development. The question is whether it is possible to define development in an objective and universal manner. Advocates of traditionalist historicism maintained that development is a culturally specific phenomenon and that it should be only defined through each society's internal customs and traditions. For rationalist objectivists, on the other hand, development implies a universal and objective definition which can be equally applied to all societies.

Finally, the fourth level of discourse in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *The Secret* is oriented to a question which was not seriously debated in 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran or in any other part of the world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's analysis is here a pioneering one and its relevance is becoming increasingly more visible for humanity at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The question here is the relation of development with nationalism and internationalism. Does true development require the emergence of a just and global-oriented international context, or are the nationalistic institutions and politics of national exclusion, domination, and rivalry adequate for authentic development of humanity? In 1875 the exclusive supremacy of the nationalistic model of development was the premise of all development debates. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá rejects that premise and considers questions such as world peace and international cooperation as imperatives for advancement and development of the entire humanity in the foreseeable future.

It is clear that all these four levels of discourse are interrelated. However, for the sake of historical and analytical clarity I will discuss them separately in the following sections.

### **3. The politics of reform: From patrimonial to legal authority**

In order to understand the historical context of the writing of *The Secret* we must pay close attention to the reform movements of the decade of 1870s in Iran. After a brief period of attempts at reform in the early years of Nasiri'd-Din Shah's rule by the prime minister Amir Kabir, the politics of reform and modernization was put aside and discontinued. The situation did not change until 1871 when Husayn Khan was appointed by Nasiri'd-Din Shah as the minister of justice. This appointment implied some interest in reform on the part of the Shah. Husayn Khan was a relatively

enlightened man who was exposed to modern ideas during his ambassadorial post in Ottoman's court of Istanbul. Prior to assumption of his ministerial position, Husayn Khan had spent 12 years in Istanbul. At that time the cosmopolitan Istanbul was one of the most significant centers of cultural and political criticism and a place for dissemination and debate of the Western ideas. The ideal of the French Revolution and the ideas of the philosophy of the Enlightenment were influential within Istanbul intellectual circles. In addition, Husayn Khan was closely familiar with the Ottoman policies of legal and administrative reform called Tanzimat. For all these reasons Husayn Khan had become a serious advocate of reform who continuously encouraged Nasiri'd-Din Shah to initiate reform policies. During the 1860s Russia's activities in Central Asia increased and it continued to annex additional parts of the region to its territory. Furthermore, Iran's economy continued to decline. The commercial significance of the Persian Gulf declined and deindustrialization increased. In this situation, Qajar princes levied additional taxes on land and caused increasing poverty among the population. During his 1869 trip to Shi'ih holy places in Iraq, the Shah could observe the widespread poverty of different regions of Iran.

All these factors encouraged the Shah to appoint Husayn Khan to ministerial political positions to enable him to initiate reform policies. In 1872 Nasiri'd-Din Shah named Husayn Khan as his prime minister. But Husayn Khan's concessions to British investors became a pretext to mobilize effective opposition against him by the joint forces of conservative 'ulama and Qajar princes. Therefore in 1873 Shah asked for his resignation. However, Husayn Khan was appointed as the minister of defense, and he continued to implement his reforms throughout the decade. Finally, he was relieved of all political posts in 1880, and died in the next year. The policy of reform was effectively terminated and Shah returned to his dictatorial and patrimonial policies.<sup>13</sup>

During his various ministerial posts, Husayn Khan tried to carry out varieties of social and political reforms. They can be divided into judicial, military, political, economic, and cultural reforms. In judicial affairs, he tried to limit the arbitrary judicial power of the local landlords, governors, and 'ulama over their subjects. The governors were normally Qajar princes who, together with 'ulama, had unlimited legal and judicial power over the people. The arbitrary prosecution, sentencing, and punishment of the peasants by their landlords were some of the most common sources of oppression and social injustice. This included the execution of their subjects. Husayn Khan tried to confine the judicial power to the ministry of justice and the official representatives of the ministry. He also made any capital punishment dependent on the approval of the headquarter of the justice ministry. In military institutions, he tried to make the military authority more impersonal and bureaucratic. Fighting corruption and financial abuse was one of his primary concerns. For that reason, he emphasized creation of better accounting system and statistics. He also tried to make the military more efficient by production of weapons and implementation of a new code of rules concerning military service. He attempted to decrease the arbitrary power of the higher officers, normally Qajar princes, over the soldiers, and created some military colleges.

In political affairs Husayn Khan emphasized political centralization at the expense of the arbitrary power of the Qajar governors and 'ulama. He created a cabinet system which consisted of nine ministers and a prime minister. The functions and authority of each minister was defined more clearly and the prime minister became the mediation between the king and the ministers. This also implied decreasing authority of the Shah and increasing power of the prime minister. Husayn Khan tried to limit the salaries of the governors and ministers through adoption of formal rules and fight against corruption in political positions.

In economic realm, Husayn Khan attempted a tax reform by limiting the authority of the governors, landlords, and ‘ulama in taxing their subjects, and by reforming the ministry of finance through better accounting system and statistics. He also tried to create an infrastructure for a modern economy by construction of roads and railroads. Given his suspicion of Russia and lack of budget, he gave railroad concession to a British company.

Finally, Husayn Khan tried to initiate some cultural reforms as well. He wanted to expose the Shah to the modern developments in the West. Consequently, he encouraged Nasiri’-d-Din Shah to travel to Europe so that he would note the need for reform in Iran. In 1873 Shah made his first trip to Europe. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *The Secret* was written between Shah’s first and second trip to the West. Husayn Khan expanded and created modern educational colleges and created new weekly papers. He constructed several important buildings, streets, and mosques, and installed lights in Tehran’s streets.<sup>14</sup>

As I mentioned before, the reform attempts of the 70s did not continue and was not effective. Nasiri’-d-Din Shah himself was not pleased with the limits on his own dictatorial power. But it was the united opposition of the Qajar princes and conservative religious leaders which made the reform initiatives from the beginning condemned to failure. Qajar princes and ‘ulama were the main authority in the semi-feudal patrimonial system of authority in Iran. and they resented any attempt at formalization or centralization of their judicial, political, and financial powers. The ‘ulama were particularly unhappy with the codification and centralization of the judicial and educational systems. That meant effective limitation of the authority of religious leaders in legal jurisdiction, education, and taxation. The construction of railroad was also vehemently opposed by them since it opened contact with the infidel West.

We can now understand the alternative political directions of the two opposing groups in more technical language. Max Weber (1864-1920), the prominent German sociologist, has explicated the sociological terminology for alternative forms of authority. According to him authority can be either charismatic, traditional, or bureaucratic. Charismatic authority is based upon the belief of the people that the leader is endowed with extraordinary characteristics. Prophets of God are the best historical examples of charismatic authority. The word of charismatic figure is the sole criterion of law by itself. However, charismatic authority is normally unstable, and is soon replaced by traditional authority. Most of human history is the history of traditional authority. Traditional authority, which maintains the legitimacy of blind imitation of the past traditions, is itself divided in patriarchal and patrimonial types of authority. Patriarchal authority is a family type of authority. The father is the leader and he has no staff or officials. The leader is not dissociated from the subjects. In patrimonial authority, however, the leader is dissociated from his subjects. But the entire group is ruled as the personal possession of the ruling family. It is normally the relatives of the ruler who have arbitrary power over different parts of the country. Usually, these relatives are the governors and the generals of the local armies who finance themselves through their feudal rights of taxation over the peasants. Opposed to both types of traditional authority are the bureaucratic authority in which authority becomes impersonal, based upon formal and universal rules and laws, and allocation of offices is determined in terms of technical knowledge and qualifications, and not personal characteristics or connections, of the individuals. Max Weber calls this bureaucratic form of authority legal-rational.<sup>15</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *The Secret* is clearly related to these important developments in the decade of



1870. His basic message is a refutation of the traditionalist forces and their patrimonial system of authority. He supports the spirit of reform while explicating its limitations. While His criticism of the patrimonial system is clearly explicit, His critique of the ideals of the reform camp is more subtle. The main weakness of the reform attempt was its lack of a clear vision of development. That is precisely what is offered in *The Secret*. At the same time, while ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defends legal-rational type of political and administrative authority, He does not believe in the centralization of bureaucratic power which was attempted by the reform party. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes it clear that He is categorically opposed to patrimonial system with its arbitrary and undemocratic power of the local governors and landlords. But He equally opposes undemocratic forms of centralized power. As we will see in the next sections, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision of modernity is both democratic and decentralized. The democratic element was absent from Husayn Khan’s policies and ideological framework. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1875, and Bahá’u’lláh much earlier, have been the first Iranians who raised the call for parliamentary democracy for Iran. We will discuss this issue later.

But it is not just parliamentary democracy which was emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. It was also a decentralized democratic ideal. This issue will be more evident when we discuss the fourth layer of discourse in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *The Secret*. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, contrary to the ideology of the Iranian reformists, the nationalistic centralization is not adequate for the challenge of development at this stage of social development. His vision aims at a political and economic system in which power is simultaneously more decentralized and more global. There is hardly an adequate term in the language of political theory for such a creative outlook. As we will see later, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision is discussed more clearly in His other writings when He talks about unity in diversity in the context of the principle of oneness of humankind.

#### **4. Religion and modernity: Return to the past or rejection of religion?**

In the first half of the 19th century there is hardly a trace of innovative cultural, social, and political ideas in Iranian intellectual circles. The only exception to this rule are the heretical religious movements which revolutionized Iranian society, transformed archaic traditions, and shook the power structures of both Qajar dynasty and conservative religious establishment. The most significant expression of this new religious orientation was the Bábí movement. ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi, commonly called the Báb, revealed His spiritual mission in Shiraz in the year 1844. He vehemently rejected the existing political and religious hierarchy and questioned the legitimacy of any traditional form of authority. His authority was purely a charismatic one rooted in His claim to be the Manifestation of God for humanity. However, He did not transform His charismatic authority into a rational, codified, and administrative form of a new spiritual and social order. On the contrary He announced the imminent advent of a new Manifestation of God Who would create a new world order. Bahá’u’lláh, the fulfillment of the Báb’s prophecy, revealed specific and clear teachings for the emergence and construction of a new spiritual and global order. The followers of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh were brutally persecuted in Iran. In 1852-53, thousands of the Bábís were martyred by the order of the Qajar king and ‘ulama.

The widespread and heroic expression of faith by the followers of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh, and the effective critique of traditional and ossified ideas by the new spiritual movement shook the political and ideological power structure of Iranian society. It is mostly due to the shock and inspiration of this movement that new social and political ideas began to emerge in the second half



of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *The Secret* should also be understood as a participant in this general intellectual debate which was going on in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The dominant question was the relation of modernity to Islamic Faith. Some of the atheist participants in these debates were afraid to express their ideas explicitly and, therefore, usually presented their ideas in a way that would not formally oppose Islam. But aside from these tactical methods, we can distinguish two clear opposite positions in these debates. For the secular intellectuals the backwardness of Iran was due to the Islamic culture and beliefs of the Iranians. They argued that Western societies could modernize and develop because they had effectively put religious superstitions aside and attacked religious beliefs. French philosophy of the Enlightenment was the ideal model of these Iranian intellectuals. They repeated with enthusiasm the atheistic currents of the Enlightenment, arguing that Iran must discard religion to be able to be modernized.

The most explicit of this form of attack on Islam was expressed in the writings of Akhundzadih (1812-1878). In his anonymous and fictitious forms of writing he criticized the dominant Islamic culture of Iran and argued that Islam was opposed to rationality, modernity, and economic development. He ridiculed Islamic traditional learning and sciences. For instance, he made extensive reference to the detailed description of the geography of heaven and hell in the writings and speeches of Muslim ‘ulama, wondering about the reason why these ‘ulama know nothing about the geography of the earth and scientific geography. Instead of blindly repeating those other-worldly fabricated geography, Iranians would do better if they pay attention to the science of geography of this world. Similarly, he ridiculed the belief of Iranian Shi’ih Muslims who assumed that their 12th Imam had disappeared from the world a thousand years ago, living in the imaginary cities of Jabolqa and Jabolsa and waiting to reappear in the future. Akhundzadih criticized Shi’ih practice of dissimulation which, he argued, has created a culture of hypocrisy and corruption in Iran. Furthermore, he objected to the prevalent practice of polygamy, and questioned many different customary practices of the Muslims in Iran. For example, he talks with disgust about the practice of carrying the dead from Iran to Iraq to be buried in Shi’ih holy cities. The fact that the bodies had to be carried for many weeks or months during hot summers, over the mules, Akhundzadih said, is repulsive not only to the humans who were exposed to them, but also to the poor animals who could not escape the unhealthy odor of decomposed bodies.<sup>16</sup>

Opposed to the secular intellectuals, the conservative and traditionalist ‘ulama rejected the culture of modernity and asked for return to Islamic tradition. According to this perspective, Iran, like other Islamic countries, was once a leading economic and political force in the world. This cultural and political victory and superiority of Iran was a product of its submission to Islamic law and authority. For many centuries, Islamic empires had been victorious against the infidel Western powers, forcing them into subjection. Islamic sciences were taught all over the world including Western academies. Therefore, they argued, Islam is the cause and the agent of progress and civilization. The backwardness of Iran in recent centuries is simply due to deviation from Islamic law and tradition, and imitation of Western culture and ideas. According to the conservative religious leaders, there was a fundamental opposition between the precepts of Islam and the culture of modernity. The solution, therefore, is to return to the same form of cultural, economic, political, and administrative system which was prevalent in the past. Development means rejection of Western culture, science, education, law, administration, and political institutions, and returning to the old traditions of Islam.

Before discussing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ingenious position with regard to this important debate it is

necessary to provide some more details about the intellectual currents in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. The position of the conservative ‘ulama was hardly clearly articulated. They remained in their traditional discourse and their rejection of modernity and modern institutions were usually expressed in the form of denouncement of religious heresy and equating any modernist idea with the Bábí movement, which was automatically condemned by them. Even at the time of Constitutional Revolution in the early years of 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the rank of ‘ulama was divided on the question of constitutionalism, the conservative ‘ulama continued to denounce constitutionalism because they identified it with Bábí and Bahá’í doctrines.

However, the secular intellectuals were much more articulate in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the 1850s and 60s the first group of the reform-oriented secular writings appears in Iran. Akhundzadih and Malkum Khan (1833-1908) are the most active of their generation. They call for reform of law and administration, reform of Persian alphabet and script, defend the policy of granting concessions to Europeans, and found a secret modernist group called Faramush Khanih. The most important development of the 70s, however, was the assumption of political power by the reformist group. Husayn Khan gave political positions to some of the reform-oriented secular politicians including Malkum Khan and Yusif Khan and was specially influenced by Malkum. The decisive defeat of the reform camp at the end of the 70s, turned 1880s to a decade of political pessimism and disillusion. During the 80s Jamalú’d-Din Asadabadi (Al-Afghani) (1838-1896), an Iranian who pretended to be Afghani, wrote political works using Islamic symbols to defend his modernist and anti-colonialist ideas. Finally, it is in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that bitter opposition to the reign of Nasiri’d-Din Shah is expressed by Malkum Khan from London, and Jamalú’d-Din and Aqa Khan-i-Kermani (1853-1896) from Istanbul.<sup>17</sup>

The decade of 1890s paves the way for constitutional revolution in Iran in the next decade. Two particular events mark 1890s. The first is the boycott of tobacco by the religious leaders as a protest against tobacco concession to a British company. From now on many of the ‘ulama participate in Constitutional Movement. However, their ambivalence concerning the relation of modernity and Islam reappears in devastating forms in drafting and implementing the new constitution, which eventually led to the failure of parliamentary forces. The second event was the assassination of Nasiri’d-Din Shah by a follower of Jamalú’d-Din in 1896. Both Jamalú’d-Din and Aqa Khan-i-Kermani died in the same year.

Looking at *The Secret* we can see the unique position of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in this significant debate. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s position in *The Secret* has a hidden and a manifest aspect. The hidden aspect is not explicated because ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is writing His text anonymously and cannot make any reference to the Bahá’í Faith. Of course, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá withheld His identity as a Bahá’í leader because otherwise His book would be automatically condemned by religious leaders and would not have a chance to speak to people. However, this implicit message is explicated in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s other writings.

To begin with the manifest content, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rejects both positions in the debate. He argues that in fact Islam has been the cause of the emergence of a most wonderful and progressive civilization, and He agrees that the solution to the backwardness of Iran is to go back to the spirit of Islam. However, He does not agree with conservative ‘ulama concerning the relation between Islam and modernity. The spirit of Islam, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms, is not opposed to either the culture of modernity or to learning positive cultural, scientific, and institutional lessons from Western non-

Muslim people. This also means opposing the atheistic position of the secular intellectuals who defended Western concept of modernity and rejected Islam as a backward ideology. Both parties had assumed a contradiction between the principles of modernity and Islam. One group, however, sided with traditional Islam, whereas the other group defended modernity.

Contrary to both positions, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues, Islam requires a dynamic approach to religion and society. He refers to the Islamic tradition according to which Muslims must seek knowledge from any part of the world even from a far and non-Muslim country like China. He writes:

If it be objected that even where material affairs are concerned foreign importations are inadmissible, such an argument would only establish the ignorance and absurdity of its proponents. Have they forgotten the celebrated hadith (holy tradition): “Seek after knowledge, even unto China”?<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that progressive force of Islamic culture has been an important cause of the cultural awakening of the medieval West which led to Renaissance, revival of classical culture, and eventually Reformation. Furthermore, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls on Muslim ‘ulama to realize the progressive role of Islam and initiate fundamental reform and rationalization of different aspects of Iranian social and spiritual life. Given the political significance of ‘ulama in Iran, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá uses a holy tradition to explicate the duties and responsibilities of ‘ulama, true scholarship, and the mission of intellectuals. In His detailed and innovative explication, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá always emphasizes the need for flexibility, historical adaptability, and development of science and learning in society.

The major difference between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretation of Islam and the interpretation shared by both conservative ‘ulama and secular intellectuals is related to the fact that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not equate spirit of Islam with traditionalism. This is the crucial difference. Since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes the dynamic spirit of Islam, consequently the spirit of Islam has to be expressed in different times in accordance with the conditions of the time. It means that for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the spirit of Islam is in fact opposed to the return to past Islamic customs, laws, and traditions. The specific form of Islamic culture in the beginning of Islam initiated a progressive civilization precisely because its specific cultural practices corresponded with the objective needs of the time and the stage of development of humanity. Insistence on traditionalism and calling for return to past practices, on the other hand, would be totally opposed to both spirit of Islam, and the requirements of an advancing civilization. In other words, for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the spirit of Islam is not opposed to the authentic conceptions of the culture of modernity and rationalization.

*The Secret*, therefore, argues that religion and modernity are not opposed to each other provided that by religion we understand the spirit of religion and not glorification and worship of tradition. But ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s position is equally a rejection of the atheistic premises of the secular intellectuals who defended modernity at the expense of spiritual and religious commitment. A more detailed discussion of this issue will be attempted in the next section, but it is necessary to point out that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directly attacks the position of the French philosophy of the Enlightenment concerning the role of religion in society. Contrary to atheistic assumptions of the French Enlightenment, divine revelation, religious values, and belief in the sanctity of spiritual guidance are not only necessary for effective order and morality, but also for social and cultural progress, advancement, modernity, and development.

It is appropriate now to explicate the implicit and hidden position of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on the same question. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s implicit message in *The Secret* is a general and essential Bahá’í principle which has been emphasized in the writings of the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and other writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In fact, it deals with the basic antinomy of the modernity: On the one hand people in different cultures recognize the need for spiritual values, religious beliefs, and moral guidance for a complex and fulfilling human life. On the other hand, open-minded persons also recognize that the past religious laws, commandments, or traditions are incompatible with the requirements of a rational and progressive modern order. Therefore, some reject rationality and accept traditionalism while others affirm progress at the expense of religious belief. However, Bahá’u’lláh has already solved this frustrating antinomy. As I mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, Bahá’u’lláh affirmed the doctrine of the oneness of all manifestations of God and the unity of all religions. This means that for Bahá’u’lláh the spirit of all religions is one and the same. That identical spirit, however, appears at different stages of human cultural development in a form that corresponds with the needs of the time. Therefore, each specific religion is a progressive and liberating force for its time. However, as time passes and humanity enters a new stage of development the previous form of expression of the divine revelation will become outdated. It is like a medicine which no longer accords with the illness of the body of humanity. In other words, one should always be devoted to the true identical religion. That means that we should not engage in the worship of past traditions but seek guidance from the recent form of expression of divine revelation. In other words, Bahá’u’lláh advocates a historical and dynamic approach to religion and religious consciousness.

We can now clarify the implicit message of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as well. We saw that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasized the progressive character of the spirit of Islam, equating it with a dynamic orientation to life. What is implied here is not only the manifest call for reinterpretation of Islam but also an invitation to Bahá’í Faith. Inspired by the message of Bahá’u’lláh we can now understand that for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the true spirit of Islam required recognition of the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. Return to the spirit of Islam, therefore, is not a return to traditionalism, but an affirmation of the progressive, continuous, and historical character of divine revelation. It must be pointed out, however, that the manifest and hidden meanings of *The Secret* did not contradict each other. They simply expressed a different side of the same complex truth.

## 5. Towards a theory of development: Romanticism or the Enlightenment?

Probably the most important question concerning the concept of social and economic development relates to the possibility of the definition of development itself. It is surprising that this same question which constitutes the most important controversy in development theory in our time has also been the major question addressed by *The Secret*. As I mentioned in the beginning of this introduction, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text is organized in terms of response to four objections against reform and rationalization. However, in fact three of those objections are different variants of the same underlying assumption. Political and academic discourse at the end of 20th century is also centered on the same controversy, struggling with the same assumption. That is one of the reasons for the relevance of *The Secret* to our generation in any part of the world.

The basic debate can be summarized in terms of the two theories of development, historicist and objectivist. According to the historicist theory, there can be no objective and universal definition of the concept of socioeconomic and cultural development. Advocates of this theory argue that

each culture has a life and logic of its own which is unique and incommensurable with those of other cultures. Consequently, they maintain, what is development for one culture is not development for another. Development, therefore, should be defined simply in terms of the internal definitions of a culture. In other words, the concept of development lacks any trans-cultural and trans-historical meaning. The term development has no meaning other than the meaning that is assigned to it within a culture. Consequently, development is simply following the dictates of tradition within each culture. To adopt a sound development policy would then mean to act on the basis of past traditions of the culture. Development becomes equated with traditionalism.

The historicist theory is opposed to the objectivist theory, according to which it is possible to define the concept of development in objective and universal forms. Development is assumed to be a process of rationalization, and this process is defined in terms of some objective characteristics of society and its form of organization. Consequently, past tradition becomes an inadequate criterion of development in any society. For the advocates of objectivist theory, cultures and social orders can also be sick or healthy, moral or immoral. In other words, the objectivist theory believes that it is possible to criticize aspects of different cultures and their traditions as inhuman, and backward. Some universal definition of development, in other words, is possible.

Usually the two theories of historicism and objectivism are expressed in a more specific and practical form. The debate between the theories, accordingly, turns into a debate between the followers of native traditionalism and the advocates of Westernization. Normally, those who believe in an objectivist definition of development argue that underdeveloped and developing countries must adopt the science, culture, and social institutions of the West European and North American societies and try to follow their model of social and cultural order. The advocates of the Western model believe in the culture of modernity, and they equate modernity with the modern West. To become modern, therefore, becomes the same as becoming developed, which is in turn identical with imitation and adoption of Western path of development. Unlike the advocates of Western model, the native traditionalists vehemently reject the relevance of the European model of development for non-European countries, arguing that no society should adopt the model of any other one. Instead, they argue that developed and developing countries should reject the Western model and return to their own past tradition and follow the dictates of their own traditional religious and cultural order.

In order to understand ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concept of development we should investigate diverse aspects of this question. But before a more detailed analysis, it is useful to make some general observations. The position of *The Secret* can be described neither in Westernization nor in native traditionalist models of development. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defends the culture of modernity. But His definition of modernity is not the same as the model of the West European societies. Nor is His modernity one of blind imitation of old and ossified traditions. In fact, what is the most significant about *The Secret* is that it offers a novel concept of modernity which transcends existing social and cultural patterns. That is why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá simultaneously defends and criticizes the Western model of development. He calls for learning the empirical science and technological advances of Europe, while He attacks the materialistic and militaristic features of the modern Western culture. Similarly, He defends the spirit of Islamic tradition while rejecting the blind worship of past traditions.

Both modernity and development, therefore, are defined by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as a process of

rationalization. This progressive rationalization, however, has two distinct but related dimensions. Instrumental or formal rationalization deals with the application of modern science and efficient utilization of the means for the attainment of the ends. However, practical or moral rationalization relates to the development of the moral, spiritual, and communicative capacities of the humans.<sup>19</sup> Authentic modernity, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms, is not possible without the combination of material, or formal, and spiritual, or moral, dimensions of civilization. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

A superficial culture, unsupported by a cultivated morality, is “a confused medley of dreams,” and external lustre without inner perfection is “like a vapor in the desert which the thirsty dreameth to be water.” For results which would win the good pleasure of God and secure the peace and well-being of man, could never be fully achieved in a merely external civilization. The people of Europe have not advanced to the higher planes of moral civilization, as their opinions and behaviors clearly demonstrate.<sup>20</sup>

But in order to understand the issue better we should investigate more closely the two opposing theories of development. In the history of social and political theory the objectivist/Western model of development is equated with the French philosophy of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the native traditionalist/historicist theory was first formulated by the Romantic theory. In fact, all major debates on this issue ultimately go back to the fundamental opposition between the 18th century philosophy of the Enlightenment and the early 19<sup>th</sup> century German Romanticism. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s position is in fact a refutation of both perspectives with a novel synthesis of the positive points of each doctrine.

The philosophy of the Enlightenment was a rationalistic theory. It argued that humans are by nature rational, and that a rational society is one which corresponds to the laws of human nature. For the Enlightenment, application of empirical science, capitalism, and political democracy is the fundamental feature of a rational society. Humans were defined as rational. That meant that the fundamental law of human nature is utilitarianism. In other words, they argued, humans are totally determined and there is no freedom of will. Human behavior is completely determined and predictable because by nature humans pursue pleasure and happiness and avoid pain and suffering. Therefore, humans are rational in the sense that they choose the most efficient course of action to maximize their utility. This static and ahistorical conception of humans became the basis of their political theory. A society was perceived by them to be rational if it would allow individuals to freely pursue their interests. Capitalism, freedom from traditional, moral, and religious restraints became the sacred imperatives of this liberalist theory. Capitalism became the only natural form of society because it was seen to allow competitive pursuit of interests and maximize pleasure for individuals. Therefore, the way for development is to use scientific knowledge to dominate nature and increase human capacity to pursue his pleasure in the context of an unbridled capitalism. Consequently, the philosophers of the Enlightenment maintained, West European societies are the only rational societies. All other cultures and societies are superstitious, backward, and irrational. Major philosophers of the Enlightenment—like Voltaire, Holbach, La Mettrie, Diderot, Condorcet, and Helvetius—supported this basic perspective.<sup>21</sup>

Romantic theory of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a reaction against the excessive and arrogant pronouncements of the Enlightenment theory. It was based upon an extreme form of historical consciousness, in the sense that it rejected the existence of any universal human nature and defined humans as simply a social and historical being. This meant that for romanticists humans were



cultural products of a specific society. Society, on the other hand, was primarily an expression of non-rational cultural symbols like language, poetry, music, religion, tradition, and mythology. Each culture was an organic being, having a spirit of its own. No culture could be compared to any other culture, and therefore the only criterion for values became the internal tradition of each culture. What was crucial for the Romantics was to maintain the unity of culture and act in accordance with the unerring dictates of that unitary tradition. Romantics, like Friedrich Schlegel, August Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher, opposed the emerging industrial and democratic order in Europe and called for monarchism, a return to medieval class system and religious traditions.<sup>22</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concept of modernity and development is qualitatively different from both these immoderate and one-sided theories. In His conception of humans, He defines humans in terms of the interaction of both rational and normative orientations. Humans are in fact historical beings, but this historical orientation becomes the basis of a progressive and open perspective and, unlike the Romantics, it does not end in blind worship of tradition. The dynamic flow of history implies that at each stage of its development humanity must actualize its potentialities for that time, and that requires adaptation to the objective requirements of the time. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms the beauty of all cultures. We should learn the creative lessons of the spirit of all cultures and their traditions in order to march forward. Both historicity and respect for the creative spirit of cultures and religions call for a progressive attitude. However, this progressive attitude is not the same as the philosophy of the Enlightenment. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Enlightenment’s conception of humans is too materialistic, selfish, and mechanical. Humans are motivated by both normative values and rational considerations. The meaning of life, unlike the theory of the Enlightenment, is not one of insatiable consumption. Such a life is spiritually impoverished and morally corrupt.

The most problematic feature of Enlightenment theory is its narrow definition of rationality. Rationality is only defined in terms of instrumental and formal rationality, and the idea of practical and moral rationality is entirely overlooked by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Consequently, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s notion of development and modernity is one of progressive rationalization. But this rationalization is not the same as Enlightenment’s conception of reason. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s rationalization has at least three distinct features which are unique to His vision. First, it is based upon a historical consciousness, and not a doctrine of a fixed selfish human nature. Secondly, it is composed of two types of rationalization process, instrumental and moral ones. Finally, it is based upon a global approach to modern humanity. I will discuss the third element in the next section. But now it is time to elaborate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s solution to the antinomy of the historicist and objectivist models in more detail.

### ***A. Critique of historicist theory***

‘Abdu’l-Bahá strongly criticizes the historicist theory of development. We saw that historicist theory, as first formulated by the Romantics, called for veneration of old practices and worship of archaic traditions. However, such a position is entirely devoid of any historical sensitivity, because it recognizes historical process in the past but wants to stop the flow of history in the present. The advocates of historicist tradition are of two groups. In the past, historicists were in fact not advocating tolerance of other cultures. Rather, they normally believed in the superiority of their own culture and tradition and had no problem in imposing and generalizing their own tradition on other cultures. However, they talked about cultural uniqueness and cultural specificity only when



they were confronted with the need to adopt from other cultures. In our time, at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are some modern advocates of historicist theory who defend historicist model because of their belief in cultural tolerance and diversity. The best example of this new formulation is the post-modernist theory which considers all truth and all values to be relative and devoid of any objective meaning and affirms cultural diversity. However, both these forms of historicist theory are one-sided. The first version is an ethnocentric doctrine which is imprisoned in the worldview of its past traditions and finds its own tradition to be the only cultural truth and superior to all other cultures. The conservative ‘ulama’s position was an example of this intolerant form of historicism. In this sense historicist theory becomes identical with its opposite theory namely the philosophy of the Enlightenment which believed in the superiority of Western modern culture and expressed a narrow-minded ethnocentrism. But the more modern version of historicism is equally problematic. If one reject any objective truth or value, then there is no reason to defend the value of diversity either. Cultural and political intolerance and imperialism would then be as good as cultural tolerance. Post-modernist theory is trapped in a fundamental contradiction. On the one hand it rejects any objectivity for any value, and yet calls for the moral imperative of mutual respect and tolerance. But this can only make sense if a post-modernist make a distinction between good tradition and bad tradition. Tolerant cultures become good ones and intolerant cultures unacceptable. Obviously no longer the internal cultural tradition is sufficient for definition of right and wrong, rational and irrational.<sup>23</sup>

Both types of historicist theory ignore the fact that in the traditions of all past cultures there have been significant laws and customs which have defended particularistic interests of the possessors of power and have systematically suppressed the rights of other groups. War, imperialistic invasion, religious intolerance, extremes of social inequality, patriarchy, and racial, ethnic, and linguistic intolerance have been frequent realities of past traditions. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá development cannot be equated with unconditional worship and glorification of one’s own past tradition. Humanity must march forward and, in this march, it must also learn from the creative spirit of glorious cultural innovations of the past. The other problem with the historicist tradition is that no tradition is absolutely unitary. In any society, there are elements of so many diverse and opposing cultural traditions and worldviews. By definition, then a historicist model must suppress the richness of its cultural history to be able to pretend that it is following a one true tradition of its history. That has always been a pretext for persecution of minorities and suppression of human rights of various groups.

It is for these reasons that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s vision of development is neither historicist nor ethnocentric. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá authentic development is equated with the principle of unity in diversity. It means that respect for the internal conditions and cultures of different societies must be one of the elements of the definition of development. However, there are certain objective and universal features and preconditions for development as well. In discussing the universal preconditions of development ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls for many forms of rationalization in Iranian society. For instance, He argues that a legal system in which the judicial decision is oriented to the objective features of action and not based upon the arbitrary discretion of the judge is a rational model for all cultures and societies. If the judicial practice of Iran deviates from this model, then instead of celebration of injustice and inefficiency, judicial reform must be implemented. He effectively argues that if the judicial system is not consistent, predictable, and universalistic, the results will be unending waste of resources for further judicial claims:

Up to now the religious law has not been given a decisive role in our courts, because each of the ‘ulama has been handing down decrees as he saw fit, based on his arbitrary interpretation and personal opinion. For example, two men will go to law, and one of the ‘ulama will find for the plaintiff and another for the defendant. It may even happen that in one and the same case two conflicting decisions will be handed down by the same mujtahid, on the grounds that he was inspired first in one direction and then in the other. There can be no doubt that this state of affairs has confused every important issue and must jeopardize the very foundations of society. For neither the plaintiff nor the defendant ever loses hope of eventual success, and each in turn will waste his life in the attempt to secure a later verdict which would reverse the previous one.<sup>24</sup>

It becomes clear that for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá at this stage of the development of humanity, some universal principles are imperative for all societies and cultures. In addition to rationalization of law and judiciary, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá calls for political rationalization as well. For Him, equality of all citizens in terms of basic rights, and political democracy are among the objective and universal features of development of modern societies. If internal tradition is one of discrimination and violation of individual rights, or if it maintains an oppressive political structure, it is then the tradition which should change and adapt to the imperatives of an emerging complex and international world order. It is interesting that historicist theory is usually a critique of ethnocentrism and imperialism. But if historicist theory wants to maintain its protest against cultural and political imperialism, then it must respect the inherent rights and dignity of the individuals as well. Then the same historicist theory must defend equality of rights of individuals as a universal principle of development.

It is important to recognize that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s call for political democracy in Iran was an innovation in the intellectual currents of 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran.<sup>25</sup> The next call for political democracy in Iran was made by Malkum Khan in his article in Qanun newspaper, published in London, in 1892, about 17 years after *The Secret*.<sup>26</sup>

It is also important to note that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s discussion of political democracy follows neither the Western nor the Eastern model. In modern Western political tradition the question of political power is primarily the question of representative government and universal election. In the traditional Eastern model, the question of leadership has concentrated on the moral preconditions and characteristics of the leader. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes both issues and insists on both universal participation and moral requisite of the elected.<sup>27</sup>

Similar to His invitation for political reform, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also encourages administrative reform by attacking corruption and nepotism, and calling for moral and institutional changes which will make arbitrary and abusive policies impractical.<sup>28</sup>

Technological and economic reforms is frequently discussed in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text. He advocates industrial expansion, technological and scientific consolidation, social planning on the basis of rational prediction of the future, universal protection of the rights and freedom of all individuals, and infrastructural reform.<sup>29</sup>

An important issue discussed by *The Secret* is the question of work ethics. Unlike the prevailing norms of Iranian society which encouraged unproductive pursuits and poverty, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

praises acquisition of wealth provided that two conditions are met. First, it should be gained through individual's own productive activities in commerce, agriculture, art, and industry. Secondly it must be accompanied by a sense of moral responsibility towards other humans and used in philanthropic ways.

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá in this text does not explicitly raise the question of capitalism or socialism, His position is already clear. He calls for equitable income distribution in society, which means that He neither supports total income equality and elimination of competition in civil society, nor that He accepts unlimited competitive capitalist liberalism and excessive inequality. In His other writings, however, 'Abdu'l-Bahá deals with this question directly and explicitly. It is clear that for 'Abdu'l-Bahá both ideological extremes are unacceptable. He calls for elimination of poverty and excess of wealth, but accepts moderate economic competition in the context of a new approach to the meaning of work, commitment to moral and spiritual principles of oneness of humankind and community solidarity, emphasis on agriculture, decentralized fiscal, economic, and administrative structures, welfare measures for the poor, and harmony and cooperation of the public and private sectors. It is interesting that 'Abdu'l-Bahá asks Iranians to note the economic and technological changes happening in Japan as one of the examples of economic reform.<sup>30</sup> The significance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ideas on economic questions will be further discussed in the next section. However, the moral framework of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concept of wealth is evident in *The Secret*. He writes:

Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge, the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor—in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society—its possessor will stand out before God and man as most excellent of all who live on earth and will be accounted as one of the people of paradise.<sup>31</sup>

Another important area discussed by *The Secret* is educational rationalization. He even mentions the possibility of His writing a second volume on the question of educational reform.<sup>32</sup> Elements of this reform include universal education, concentration on beneficial and scientific disciplines, and avoidance of scholastic controversies which are harmful to social harmony and scientific productivity. He argues that effective attainment of social justice in society is dependent on the presence of an enlightened and educated population.<sup>33</sup> It must be noted, however, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's call for scientific education and His warning against scholastic controversies should not be interpreted as a rejection of the need for moral education. On the contrary, for 'Abdu'l-Bahá what is crucial is the harmony and cooperation of both moral and technical education.

Finally, I should refer to the question of religious rationalization in *The Secret*. The focus of the text is in fact an affirmation of the need for religious reform in Iran. 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions Protestant Reformation and calls on the Muslim clergy to learn from the lessons of that historical experience.<sup>34</sup> However, the longest part of *The Secret* is devoted to the refutation of the traditionalist claims of the conservative 'ulama who argued that Islam is opposed to learning modern science and institutional norms. The Muslim 'ulama have usually rejected the adoption of Western practices as heretical innovations contrary to Islam. 'Abdu'l-Bahá provides forceful

arguments against this version of historicist theory. First, He argues that details of scientific and technological questions are to some extent independent from the question of religious teachings and revelation.<sup>35</sup> Similarly, He argues that, in fact, Prophet Muhammad called for learning of knowledge from all groups, and He reminds His readers that Muhammad adopted Persian military tactics in the Battle of Ditches.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, He notes the adoption of many pre-Islamic practices in Islamic law.<sup>37</sup> He also points out that Greek logic and philosophy were adopted by Islamic sciences and are taught by the same ‘ulama who are now opposed to any learning from Western societies!<sup>38</sup> It is in this context that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reinterprets an Islamic tradition which explicates the characteristics of authentic ‘ulama.<sup>39</sup> His interpretation calls for attention to the creative spirit of Islam and a progressive and historical orientation.

### ***B. Critique of Enlightenment’s objectivist theory***

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s refutation of the traditionalist theory of development affirmed the possibility of some universal elements of the concept of development. However, this is by no means an acceptance of the objectivist theory as is formulated by the philosophy of the Enlightenment and its advocates in Iran. Consequently ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is opposed to any Westernization theory because He argues that the model of development of the West is one-sided and inadequate. As we saw ‘Abdu’l-Bahá supports and encourages the adoption of the positive elements of the Western model. This means primarily learning modern science and technology, and moving towards a universalistic, and democratic pattern of authority in which any form of discrimination on the basis of religious belief, sex, class, race, ethnicity, political beliefs and other personal characteristics are excluded. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá this process of democratization and inclusion is indeed a moral imperative and a universal aspect of definition of development for any society in modern age. However, contrary to Iranian secular intellectuals who advocated blind imitation of the West, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá criticizes fundamental aspects of Western model of development.

For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, true modernity is not yet realized in the West not only because of the persistence of varieties of discriminations and prejudices, an issue emphasized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá constantly in His trip to Europe and America, but also because Western concept of rationalization is only an instrumental one. True rationalization, however, requires both spiritual and material progress. Iranians, therefore, should follow the scientific and technical achievements of the West without following its one-dimensional approach to modernity and development. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s criticism of the objectivistic model of the Enlightenment can be summarized in three arguments. First, Enlightenment’s theory is based upon a static conception of human nature and society. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, humans are both spiritual and historical beings and society is an organic entity.<sup>40</sup> Modernity, in other words, is a historically-specific phenomenon. However, the present structural characteristics of the world requires a new approach to the concept of development. Development has to be understood both in terms of universal and global common principles and as a decentralized local process.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s second argument against the philosophy of the Enlightenment is related to the atheistic aspect of the Enlightenment. He directly mentions Voltaire and criticizes his assumption that instrumental reason without the support of spiritual values is sufficient for a progressive social order. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s discussion here is similar to Bahá’u’lláh’s pronouncements on the question of order. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, development not only requires scientific and material creativity and progress, but also spiritual renewal and progress. The mistake of the philosophers of the

Enlightenment was to equate traditional religious customs with the spirit of religion. They called for scientific and institutional change but failed to see the need for spiritual regeneration as well. Instead, they rejected religion and spirituality. Effective order is dependent on internal restraints, universal love and solidarity, and practical rationality. He writes:

It is certain that the greatest of instrumentalities for achieving the advancement and the glory of man, the supreme for the enlightenment and the redemption of the world, is love and fellowship and unity among all the members of the human race. Nothing can be effected in the world, not even conceivably, without unity and agreement, and the perfect means for engendering fellowship and unity is true religion.<sup>41</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá points out that the present customs among the believers of different religions should not be equated with the truth of religion. He makes historical analysis to show the creative role of divine revelation in creation of civilization, extension of unity and fellowship, and advancement of science and civilization. Neither rejection of religion nor blind obedience to the past traditions is the right choice. What is required is the adoption of a progressive and historical approach to divine revelation.

More specifically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that contrary to the idea of the philosophy of the Enlightenment, morality requires spiritual commitment. Concerning the argument that people are instinctively equipped with moral consideration and therefore need no spiritual guidance and education, He replies that man’s so-called “moral sense” is in fact a product of education. He also notes that even if there is a moral sense it would be confined to few individuals and not a feature common to the masses of people. But even a latent moral sense needs actualization through religion and spiritual education. Furthermore, He makes it clear that moral principles are historically inspired by great historical religions. Finally, He adds that even if a person is morally inclined, his purity of heart and good intentions will increase through spiritual feelings.<sup>42</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s third objection against Western model of development is concerned with Western culture and policies of militarism, colonialism, domination, and international aggression. He writes:

The people of Europe have not advanced to the higher planes of moral civilization, as their opinions and behaviors clearly demonstrate. Notice for example how the supreme desire of European governments and people today is to conquer and crush one another.<sup>43</sup>

This question is central for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s worldview given His belief in the oneness of humankind and His commitment to the principles of love, unity, and peace. In fact, His affirmation of the need for a global approach to development is influenced by His rejection of culture of violence and aggression. Authentic modernity and development, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá believes, is defined by higher levels of capacity for love, unity and service. That is far from the militaristic, selfish, and materialistic culture of the West and its theoretical expression.

Before proceeding to the next section, I should refer to some of the basic differences between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and secular Iranian intellectuals with regard to the question of reform. Aside from other issues discussed previously, a few technical differences are also to be noted. First although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encourages learning of Western science and technology, He never supported



granting of concessions to Western companies. Malkum Kan and Husayn Khan strongly defended the policy of concessions and Malkum wrote different texts to defend this thesis. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, however, did not even once support the idea. It is interesting that in 1891, after the granting of tobacco concession to a British company and before the tobacco boycott by ‘ulama, Bahá’u’lláh criticized Nasiri’-d-Din Shah’s neglect of agriculture, implying that concessions are not conducive to agrarian development.<sup>44</sup> Secondly, although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defended modernity, He never supported Faramush Khaníh because of its implicit philosophical position which was atheistic. Third, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not support the idea of reform of Persian alphabet and script. However, He did defend the need for an international auxiliary language in His writings. Fourth, unlike the ideas of the secular intellectuals, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concept of development was both decentralized and global. Finally, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approach was based upon a historical consciousness and not a static concept of society as it was found in the Enlightenment philosophy.

## 6. Global approach to development: Nationalism or internationalism

An essential aspect of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s theory of development which differentiates it from any theory of development in 19<sup>th</sup> or 20<sup>th</sup> century is His emphasis on the need for international cooperation, peace, and a global approach to modernity. Although for a better understanding of this issue one must look at the totality of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings, we can find explicit analysis of this significant question in *The Secret*. Recognizing the complex interrelation of different parts of the world in economic, political, scientific, and cultural domains, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that the question of development cannot be adequately addressed simply through nationalistic measures and policies. That is why He calls on political leaders of the world to come together and create international agreements for world peace. For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a militarized world in which much of the resources of the world is wasted on military pursuits and destructive weapons is not conducive to social, cultural, and economic development. Social justice within different countries would also be difficult to achieve when governments have to waste their resources in preparation for war and arms competition. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes the need for universal disarmament, and an orientation to promote life and not death. He writes:

True civilization will unfurl its banner in the midmost heart of the world whenever a certain number of its distinguished and high-minded sovereigns...shall, for the good and happiness of all mankind, arise ... to establish the cause of universal peace. They must ... seek to establish a Union of the nations of the world. They must conclude a binding treaty and establish a covenant... In this all-embracing pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly fixed... In like manner, the size of the armaments of every government should be strictly limited, for if the preparations for war and military forces of any nation should be allowed to increase, they will arouse suspicion of the others... In this way the entire population would, first of all, be relieved of the crushing burden of expenditure currently imposed for military purposes, and secondly, great numbers of people would cease to devote their time to the continual devising of new weapons of destruction-those testimonials of greed and bloodthirstiness, so inconsistent with the gift of life-and would instead bend their efforts to the production of whatever will foster human existence and peace and well-being, and would become the cause of universal development and prosperity.<sup>45</sup>

While in *The Secret* ‘Abdu’l-Bahá does not discuss the issue in much detail, in His other writings

He elaborates extensively and frequently His global approach. Indeed this is not surprising given the fact that Bahá'u'lláh had declared oneness of humankind to be the ultimate goal of His revelation. A discussion of the details of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's global perspective is beyond the scope of this introduction. However, I should briefly mention a few points. First of all it should be understood that for 'Abdu'l-Bahá the concept of oneness of humanity is simultaneously a moral and structural imperative. This means that both a new morality of love and fellowship, and new political, economic, and cultural structures are needed for realization of true unity. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá stressed on the necessity of both individual and structural transformations of the humanity. On an individual level, oneness of humankind is based on a spiritual morality which sees all humans as equal and sacred. Humans as manifestations and mirrors of divine attributes are loved and dignified in this new moral and spiritual vision. The morality of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá is not simply a morality of consequences but also a morality of pure intentions, adaptations to the new situation, commitment to principles of equality and solidarity, and an orientation to self-sacrifice and preference of others over one's self. In short it is a morality of love. At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá called for structural transformations of social institutions as well. An important component of this new structural ideal is the emergence of international and global economic, political, linguistic, and judicial institutions. World peace, elimination of hunger, and global development are conditioned on these twin processes.

Another important point is that for Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá the present nationalistic model of social, economic, and political organization is inadequate. Humanity is becoming interdependent, and new challenges like the threat of nuclear war, pollution of the environment, and widespread hunger require an international method of problem solving. However, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá are not opposed to nationalism. Nationalism will continue to be an important element of social organization but it would no longer be the exclusive and dominant one. Instead, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá suggest both decentralization towards local initiative, and globalization towards international agreements, cooperation and structures as necessary at this stage of human development. It is a model of unity in diversity.

Finally, it is worth noting that right now at the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is really neither social class, nor race, nor sex, nor religious affiliation, nor ethnicity which is the most important source of social inequality and injustice in the world. Sociologists and philosophers so far have concentrated on these secondary causes of social inequality and oppression and have ignored the most important factor. Whether it is Marxist, liberalist, or functionalist theory, the question of liberation has been sought in terms of secondary questions. What is the most determinant of the life chances of individuals in our planet is indeed citizenship. The simple accident of the place of birth of individuals now determines their rights, opportunities, prospects for prosperity, education, income, occupation, and health. It is indeed an immoral and senseless structure in which children are systematically discriminated in terms of their national citizenship. Such a profoundly arbitrary and inhumane form of oppression and injustice is surprisingly taken for granted and accepted by philosophers and sociologists as natural and just. It is this immoral pattern of social discrimination and inequality that is rejected in Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concept of development and modernity. It is precisely for the same reason that They both called for a global approach to the question of development. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision of world development is one in which oppressive imperialistic nationalism is replaced by consultative, democratic, and universalistic pattern of cooperation and equality among nations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision was and remains truly revolutionary. It is, however, a revolution rooted in love and not hatred.



## 7. Conclusion: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concept of modernity

In the beginning of this introduction I referred to Bahá'u'lláh's concept of the new world order. Having investigated 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *The Secret*, we can now understand that in fact 'Abdu'l-Bahá's concepts of modernity and development are elaborations of Bahá'u'lláh's creative vision. Development requires a process of rationalization in which both instrumental rationality and moral rationality are combined and affirmed in the life of humanity. This multi-dimensional rationalization must take a global orientation as well. What is significant in this model is that it transcends and solves the antinomies between opposing one-sided approaches. It affirms the sanctity of religious truth and guidance but at the same time adopts a progressive and non-traditionalistic outlook.

One can see the creativity of the words of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Their new conception of the relation between faith and science. For them both religion and science are historically dynamic and progressive forces. It means that both science and revelation are subject to historical change and development. Both religious truth and scientific truth are relative to their times and both progress in terms of the needs of an ever-advancing humanity. Modernity and development are defined in terms of the harmony of these twin progressive forces. We can note the fundamental difference of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision from the two opposing perspectives of atheistic objectivism and traditionalistic historicism.

This complex concept of rationalization is already entailed in Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the coming of age of humanity. An extensive discussion of this complex question is not possible in this introduction. However, Bahá'u'lláh identifies three signs for His concept of the maturation of humanity. First is the discovery of a radical approach towards transmutation of elements. Second is the changing attitude towards power and domination, and third is the emergence of a world auxiliary language. The first implies a high development of science, technology and instrumental reason. The second implies that the culture of violence and aggression will be replaced by a culture of love and service. The third implies the emergence of global structures and sensibilities. It is interesting that Bahá'u'lláh defines this stage of maturity as the age of the advent of wisdom (reason) among humanity. He Writes:

One of the signs of the maturity of the world is that no one will accept to bear the weight of kingship. Kingship will remain with none willing to bear alone its weight. That day will be the day whereon wisdom will be manifested among mankind.<sup>46</sup>

One can easily see the complex notion of reason and rationalization in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. It implies a progressive movement towards efficiency, unity, communication, and love. Western accomplishments in the realm of science and instrumental reason are not accompanied by either moral rationalization or global orientation. The result is immoderation even in material civilization. Authentic development and true modernity require a qualitatively different form of rationalization. Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá offered this unique, multi-dimensional, and creative vision to humanity. Although revealed in Their writings in 19<sup>th</sup> century, its message remains creative beyond the boundaries of 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran. It is for that reason that we can understand why *The Secret* is a text for all seasons, devoted to the question of development in both Iran and the world.

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  - 3 Ibid., p. 125.
  - 4 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 213.
  - 5 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 164.
  - 6 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957), p. 62.
  - 7 Muhammad Ali Feizi, *Hayat-i-Hadrat-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Tehran: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 128 B. E.), p. 42.
  - 8 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret*, p. 11.
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  - 10 Ibid., p. 12.
  - 11 Ibid., p. 1.
  - 12 Ibid.
  - 13 Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).
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  - 18 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret*, p. 26.
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  - 26 Juan R. I. Cole, "Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century", *International Journal of the Middle East Studies*, 24, pp. 1-26.
  - 27 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret*, p. 17.
  - 28 Ibid., p. 16,
  - 29 Ibid., p. 14, 32, 39, 101.
  - 30 Ibid., pp. 111-112.
  - 31 Ibid., pp. 24-25.
  - 32 Ibid., pp. 106-107.
  - 33 Ibid., pp. 18, 105-106, 109-110, 118.
  - 34 Ibid., pp. 41-43.
  - 35 Ibid., pp. 25-26.
  - 36 Ibid., p. 27.
  - 37 Ibid., pp. 27-30.
  - 38 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
  - 39 Ibid., p. 34.
  - 40 Ibid., pp. 107-108.
  - 41 Ibid., p. 73.
  - 42 Ibid., pp. 97-98.
  - 43 Ibid., p. 61.
  - 44 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 90.
  - 45 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret*, pp. 64-66.
  - 46 See Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992), pp. 248-249.