

A BAHÁ'Í APPROACH TO SPIRITUALITY

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Abstract: This article is a brief examination of the meaning of spirituality, as gleaned from the Bahá'í writings. Familiar terms such as human nature, the human soul, and the mind are defined from basic principles and the potential powers of the human soul are discussed. The relationship of the human soul to God and the indispensable role of the Founders of the great religions as the primary link in this relationship are elucidated. The Word of God has unique transforming effect on human hearts and alone has the ability to awaken the human soul to express its potential. The purpose of becoming spiritually conscious is for humanity to prepare itself for the life beyond, which is eternal. Such a soul will achieve true happiness and liberty in this life and will, moreover, be motivated to translate that consciousness into constructive deeds for the betterment of humanity.

Spirituality – a Bahá'í approach

Human nature

Today, the most crucial need of the human race is to find a unifying vision of the nature of humanity and society. All questions on the meaning and purpose of physical reality naturally begin with examining human nature. There are in essence three forms of life in the world: the mineral, the vegetable, and the animal. Each of these levels of existence or kingdoms possesses certain qualities and capacities, which are expressed in conformity with the laws of nature. For example, in the mineral kingdom, life is expressed in terms of the movement of atoms and molecules and the transformation of one mineral to the other. In the vegetable kingdom, life is expressed at a more complex level, such that the plant can grow and reproduce. The animal has additional powers of movement, and the physical senses, enabling it to gain a greater appreciation of the natural world. The power of understanding differs in degree in the various kingdoms of creation: *“The mineral, vegetable, and animal realms are each incapable of understanding any creation beyond their own...”* (Abdu'l-Baha 1979)

The relationship of humanity to the other life forms is explained in the following way:

“Man shares the same physical powers as the animals, yet he has qualities and capacities which the animal does not possess. Thus, the animal cannot realise the intelligence of a human being, he only

knows that which is perceived by his animal senses, he cannot imagine anything in the abstract. Therefore man is the highest work of creation, the nearest to God of all creatures.” (ibid)

Thus, the Bahá'í teachings, in common with all the divinely revealed religions, consider the human race as the highest and noblest form in the world of creation, capable of reflecting divine qualities: *“And God said: Let us make humankind in our image, after our likeness.”* (Genesis 1:26)

The Bahá'í writings thus “define” the human spirit in these terms:

“The endowments which distinguish the human race from all other forms of life on earth are summed up in what is known as the human spirit.” (Universal House of Justice 1985) These endowments are expressed in this world through the instrumentality of the human mind – the essential quality of the spirit. They can be summarised as the power of conscious knowledge or the intellectual faculty, free will, power to love, the power to create, and the power to attain immortal life. Using these spiritual powers humankind breaks the laws of nature and rules over nature in a way that is not possible for any other being. For example :

“The exigency of nature demands that he should be restricted to the earth; but he, by breaking the laws of nature, soars in the atmosphere high above it... He arrests a mighty force of nature such as electric-

ity and imprisons it in an incandescent lamp. According to the law of nature, he should be able to communicate at a distance of, say, one thousand feet; but through his inventions and discoveries he communicates with the East and with the West in a few moments... In brief, all the present arts and sciences, inventions and discoveries man has brought forth were once mysteries which nature had decreed should remain hidden and latent, but man has taken them out of the plane of the invisible and brought them into the plane of the visible. This is contrary to nature's laws."

Thus, "If this power were not supernatural and extraordinary, man's accomplishments would not have been possible... It is evident that virtues are inherent in man which are not present in the world of nature. This is provable from every standpoint"(Abd'ul-Baha 1982)

Developing human potential – discovering one's spirituality

Through the instrumentality of the mind, these wonderful spiritual endowments have enabled humanity to build civilisations and to prosper materially. But such accomplishments have never satisfied the human spirit, whose mysterious nature inclines it toward transcendence, a reaching towards an invisible realm, towards the ultimate reality, that unknowable essence of essences called God. Therefore, consciously or unconsciously human souls everywhere long for spiritual fulfilment.

The human soul is described in the Bahá'í Writings as "a sign of God, a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel". (Baha'u'llah 1949)

Although human beings have been endowed with all the divine capacities, these are only latent in them at the time of birth. The development of human potential will depend entirely on whether humankind receives the right education by using its power of free will to come under the shadow of the true Educator.

Using several metaphors to illustrate this profound truth, Bahá'u'lláh explains:

"Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures and allow mankind to benefit therefrom."(ibid)

Furthermore, He says:

"These energies with which the [Almighty] hath endowed the reality of man lie, however, latent within him, even as the flame is hidden within the candle and the rays of the sun are potentially present in the lamp. The radiance of these energies may be obscured by worldly desires even as the light of the sun can be concealed beneath the dust and dross which cover the mirror."(ibid)

He then poses a statement which is the ultimate challenge to those who believe they can achieve progress without an external source of energy:

"Neither the candle nor the lamp can be lighted through their own unaided efforts, nor can it be ever possible for the mirror to free itself from its dross."

He then takes the metaphors to their logical conclusion:

"It is clear and evident that until a fire is kindled the lamp will never be ignited, and unless the dross is blotted out from the face of the mirror, it can never represent the image of the sun nor reflect its light and glory."(ibid)

In this context, the role of revealed religion becomes clear:

"And since there can be no tie of direct intercourse to bind the one true God with His creation, and no resemblance whatever can exist between the transient and the Eternal, the contingent and the Absolute, He hath ordained that in every age and dispensation a pure a stainless Soul be made manifest in the kingdoms of earth and heaven. Unto this subtle, this mysterious and ethereal Being He hath assigned a two-fold nature; the physical, pertaining to the world of matter, and the spiritual, which is born of the substance of God Himself..." (ibid)

This same truth is variously repeated in all the Holy Scriptures: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14) "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (John 1:18)

The mission of the Manifestation of God is thus to act as that external source of energy which is essential for the enlightenment of the human soul:

"Led by the light of unflinching guidance, and invested with supreme sovereignty, They [the Messengers of God] are commissioned to use the inspiration of Their words, the effusions of Their infallible grace

and the sanctifying breeze of Their Revelation or the cleansing of every longing heart and receptive spirit from the dross and dust of earthly cares and limitations.”(ibid)

“I am the light of the world: whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

The consequence of the human soul turning to these Spiritual Suns, is the expression of the inherent potentialities latent within it:

“Then, and only then, will the Trust of God, latent in the reality of man, emerge...”⁶ “Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed.” (ibid)

“But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.”(John 1:12)

The need for a mediator (the eternal Christ in Christian terminology) between God, the unknowable Essence and humanity has been reiterated in all the religions – religion is thus the only way through which human beings can become their true selves: *“I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through Me.”(John 14:6)*

Indeed, the very action of choosing to establish this vital relationship to his Creator and to abide by His will, constitutes *the highest expression of human free will in this earthly life*. By doing so, humanity will achieve the freedom to make progress in all areas of life: *“But strive first for the kingdom of God, and His righteousness [establish the lifeline and abide by the divinely ordained commandments]; and all these things [material prosperity] will be given to you as well.” (Mat. 6:33)*

Without this intervention from the world of God, human nature remains the captive of instinct, as well as of unconscious assumptions and patterns of behaviour that have been culturally determined. Humankind will then sink ever deeper into preoccupation with the material world and start abusing its divinely given powers to the detriment of itself and society. Evil actions thus become apparent under these circumstances:

“Indeed, the actions of man himself, breed a profusion of satanic power. For were men to abide by and observe the divine teachings, every trace of evil would be banished from the face of the earth.”(Baha’u’llah 1978)

Divine Revelation is the motive power of civilisation. When it occurs, its transforming effect on the minds and souls of those who respond to it, as well as its universal effect on the world’s peoples, is replicated in the new society that slowly takes shape around their experience. The Word of God creates new possibilities within both the individual consciousness and human relationships. *“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”(John 10:10)*

“Is not the purpose of every Revelation to create a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions? For if the character of mankind be not changed, the futility of God’s universal Manifestation would be apparent.”(Baha’u’llah 1931)

Faith is thus defined in the Bahá’í teachings as *“first, conscious knowledge, and second, practise of good deeds.”(Abd’ul-Baha)* The purpose of religion is to create an *“organic unity between the inner and outer realities of man.”(Universal House of Justice 1988)* In practical terms, this means that a spiritually conscious human being will be motivated to strive to acquire spiritual virtues by putting them into practice in daily life. The need for action in addition to an expression of belief alone is reflected in all religious scripture. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, or Krishna’s Bhagavad Gita revealed in such geographically and historically distant eras, are both shining examples of the immutable core of spiritual teachings common to all religions - what Bahá’u’lláh calls *“the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future”*.¹(Baha’u’llah 1949)

Cultivating Spirituality

Once a human soul has recognised the Divine Educator of his age, he must then protect and cultivate that relationship through worship, study of the Word of God and selfless service to the human race in all its multifarious aspects. One’s faith can be tested at any moment. There are therefore “spiritual exercises” that are indispensable to strengthening and nourishment of the soul of the believer. Using the

metaphor of the candle, Bahá'u'lláh illustrates the importance of this principle:

“O befriended stranger! The candle of thine heart is lighted by the hand of My power. Quench it not with the contrary winds of self and passion. The healer of all thine ills is remembrance of Me. Forget it not. Make My love thy treasure, and cherish it even as thy very sight and life.”(Baha'u'llah. The hidden Words)

“The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers...” (Shoghi Effendi 1980)

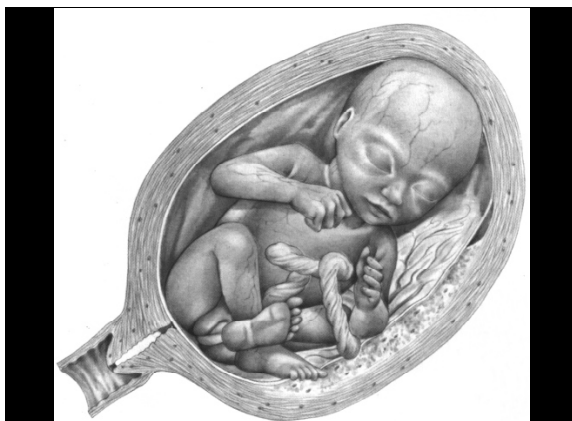
There are several hundred prayers revealed by the Founders of the Faith on a wide range of themes and for various occasions, ranging from the unity of the human race to prayer for pregnant mothers. Here is the text of the Short Obligatory Prayer – one of three such prayers, which the believer can choose to say on a daily basis:

“I bear witness, O My God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.”(Baha'u'llah 1945)

Life after death

The purpose of this life is preparation for the next. In expounding on this theme, Bahá'u'lláh cites the example of the human embryo:

“The world beyond is as different from this world, as this world is different from that of the child whilst still in the womb of its mother.”(Baha'u'llah 1949)



The embryo's single greatest task is to develop its limbs and organs for which it has limited use in the womb, but which will be indispensable for its proper functioning once it is born into this world. This can only be achieved if it establishes and maintains its link with the umbilical cord – its *life-line*. The same analogy holds true of the human soul, whose greatest task is to develop those spiritual organs that are indispensable for its progress in the world beyond.

“ The purpose underlying Their [Divine Messengers'] revelation hath been to educate men that they may, at the hour of death, ascend in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High.”(ibid)

On the powers with which a faithful soul will be invested in the world hereafter Bahá'u'lláh states:

“ The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples. They are like unto leaven which leaveneth the world of being, and constitute the animating force through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest...”(ibid)

“The soul that hath remained faithful to the Cause of God, and stood unwaveringly firm in His Path shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him.”(ibid)

Heaven and hell are, therefore, not physical gardens or torture chambers, but very real spiritual states of nearness or remoteness from God; of being under His loving guidance or removed from it:

“O son of being! Thy Paradise is My love; thy heavenly home, reunion with me. Enter therein and tarry not. This is that which hath been destined for thee in Our kingdom above and Our exalted Dominion.”(Baha'u'llah. The Hidden Words)

“They say: ‘Where is Paradise, and where is Hell?’ Say: ‘The one is reunion with Me; the other thine own self’(Baha'u'llah 1945)

Becoming an integrated person – eternal human values

Once a human soul has been awakened to its own potentialities, is spiritually reborn and comes under the training and protection of the Good Shepherd, that soul will begin to reflect ever more brilliantly the attributes of God and fulfil its destiny as the “image of God on earth”. Such a soul will exercise

the Golden Rule – the basis of love and justice - in every aspect of its life: in relationship to its own body, to family members, to fellow human beings, and to the physical environment in which it lives. Such a soul will therefore contribute to building the Kingdom of God on earth.

“Were man to appreciate the greatness of his station and the loftiness of his destiny, he would manifest naught save goodly character, pure deeds, and a seemly and praiseworthy conduct.”(Baha’u’llah 1978)

In conclusion, a spiritually conscious soul will thus strive, with the grace of God, to become the living embodiment of these timeless virtues:

“Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbour, and look upon him with a bright and friendly face. Be a treasure to the poor, an admonisher to the rich, an answerer of the cry of the needy, a preserver of the sanctity of thy pledge. Be fair in thy judgment, and guarded in thy speech. Be unjust to no man, and show all meekness to all men. Be as a lamp unto them that walk in darkness, a joy to the sorrowful, a sea for the thirsty, a haven for the distressed, an upholder and defender of the victim of oppression. Let integrity and uprightness distinguish all thine acts. Be a home for the stranger, a balm to the suffering, a tower of strength for the fugitive. Be eyes to the blind, and a guiding light unto the feet of the erring. Be an ornament to the countenance of truth, a crown to the brow of fidelity, a pillar of the temple of righteousness, a breath of life to the body of mankind, an ensign of the hosts of justice, a luminary above

the horizon of virtue, a dew to the soil of the human heart, an ark on the ocean of knowledge, a sun in the heaven of bounty, a gem on the diadem of wisdom, a shining light in the firmament of thy generation, a fruit upon the tree of humility.”(Baha’u’llah 1949)

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