

Human Nature and Human Society: A Bahá'í Viewpoint

by **William S. Hatcher**

published in *The Bahá'í Faith and Marxism*
Ottawa: Bahá'í Studies Publications, 1987

In contemplating my contribution to this forum, I think I experienced some of the same fears that our guests probably experienced. The brilliant presentation Laurie Adkin made, as well as the comments of Howard Buchbinder and Colin Leys, showed that they were trying to compensate for what has certainly been a caricature of the Marxist position on many points. In the same spirit, I would like to beg the indulgence of our guests in listening to my own presentation, because some of the points I will be explaining with regard to the Bahá'í view of the nature of man¹ may sound, in their initial formulations, very similar to positions taken by other religious groups--positions that have also been caricatured. But you will see very quickly that the Bahá'í view of these questions often differs in significant ways from traditional religious viewpoints, even when it shows some similarities to them. Also, the conclusions Bahá'ís draw from their analysis of the nature of the human being and society are often quite different from those drawn by many traditional religious communities.

With that brief introduction, I will now proceed to give a very schematic, succinct resume of what I understand to be the Bahá'í view of the human being and society. I will make no attempt in the course of this exposition, either to make links with or distinctions from Marxism. I will leave that to the ensuing discussion.

Starting with the individual human being: the Bahá'í Faith teaches that every individual has two basic aspects or dimensions called (1) the spiritual and (2) the physical or material. The material aspect of human nature derives from the genetic endowment of the individual, determined at conception, and all the subsequent interactions between this initial configuration and its physical and social environment. By "interactions," I mean not only the influences of the physical environment and of society on the individual but also the actions of the individual and his reactions to these influences. Indeed, as a result of the physical potential created by his or her genetic endowment, the individual has both needs and capacities, and therefore, not only reacts to the environment but also creatively initiates interactions with it.

The spiritual dimension of the human being is viewed by Bahá'ís as more fundamental than the physical. It derives from the existence of an objectively existing, non-physical entity called the soul or spirit, which comes into being at the moment of physical conception. Bahá'ís do not believe that physical conception is the *cause* of the non-physical soul however. Rather, the soul is brought into being by a specific creative act of that ultimate creative force in the universe, which we call God. In other words, in the Bahá'í view there is an ultimate force, which is responsible for all of the entities and forces in the

1. In this paper, I intend the term "man" to refer to all human beings, not just to males.

universe, and this ultimate force, whatever its nature, is responsible for the creation of the non-material soul or spirit of each individual human being.

Concerning the nature of the soul, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (son of the founder of the Bahá'í Faith) has said that it is made of one substance, i.e., not composed of parts or elements. According to a universal scientific principle, he explains, everything composed of parts is subject to decomposition: if an entity comes into being as a result of the combination of various elements, then it can also be destroyed by the reverse

process of the separation of these constituent elements. In particular, this is true of macrophysical entities, all of which result from various combinations of simpler entities. However, the human soul is neither physical nor composed and is therefore indivisible and nondecomposable.

Just as the human physical body has capacities and potentialities, so the soul has capacities and potentialities. These are called the *spiritual capacities* of man. These spiritual capacities are, in the Bahá'í view, objectively existing capacities inherent in the very nature of the soul. They are intrinsic to the soul and therefore cannot be separated from it. So, I think it is extremely important for our dialogue to realize that when Bahá'ís speak of man's spirit and its capacities, we are not speaking metaphorically of some complex or composite of various physical capacities (e.g., the "self" of psychology). Rather, we refer to the intrinsic capacities of the human soul.

The Bahá'í writings frequently mention three basic spiritual capacities. First is the intellect or the capacity for conscious, rational thought. Bahá'u'lláh (founder of the Bahá'í Faith) stresses that this is a capacity of the soul and not of the body. Though animals do exhibit some degree of intelligent behaviour, they do not have the capacity for self-aware rationality because they do not have a soul. Second is the capacity to initiate and sustain action. This is the capacity of will, which is, again, a capacity of the soul, not the body. Third is the capacity to love. This means the capacity to experience certain emotions or feelings, the highest of which is the emotion of altruism. An emotion motivates us to act. Altruism is that emotion which motivates the individual deliberately (i.e., with conscious knowledge of the consequences) to sacrifice himself for others. This emotion of altruism is sometimes called self-sacrificing love. An individual may have the idea (thought) of acting in an altruistic way, and clearly possesses (through the capacity of will) the potential to do so, but only the emotion of altruism can impart the moral energy to sacrifice oneself deliberately for the good of others.

In sketching the Bahá'í view of human nature, I have consistently spoken of various capacities. The word "capacity" connotes a potential, something that needs fulfillment and also something capable of being fulfilled. In the Bahá'í view, human existence is the process of the development or growth of human potential. In particular, Bahá'ís believe that the development of spiritual capacities is the fundamental purpose of all human existence. The physical capacities of the body are viewed as God-given instruments for the development of spiritual capacities. Therefore, in the Bahá'í view of human nature, man has no naturally evil part.² The whole doctrine of original sin--the idea that man is

2. Nor do Bahá'ís believe in the existence of a Satan or of any other kind of metaphysical evil force or entity.

intrinsically evil or has evil aspects within his fundamental nature--is totally antithetical to the Bahá'í concept of the nature of man. Bahá'ís view all human capacities, whether physical or spiritual, as potentially helpful to the process of full, adequate, and proper development.

However, because free will is a fact, there is also in man the potential for the misuse of both spiritual and physical capacities. The Nazis, who sent six million Jews to their death, used their intelligence to do so. Animals in the jungle could not have done such a thing. Animals, as we know, even the most ferocious, will kill and eat when they are hungry, but when they are satiated, they will stop killing. They do not kill gratuitously. Only man, with a conscious intellect (which is a spiritual capacity) could have conceived of systematically exterminating so many of his fellow creatures.

Thus, both man's physical and spiritual capacities are subject to perverted misuse. This possibility of the misuse of human capacities is the necessary concomitant of God's having allowed humans the freedom to participate actively in the process of their own development. In a very profound philosophical passage, Bahá'u'lláh explains that, had God wished to create all men in a perfected state of being, He could have

done so but that God has deliberately chosen otherwise. He has chosen to create humans with the potentiality for perfection and endowed them with the capacities necessary for the successful pursuit of this goal. Since God has given us all of the essential tools for achieving perfection, we have mainly ourselves to blame if we do not use these tools wisely.

Bahá'u'lláh views the development of spiritual capacities as the ultimate and fundamental purpose of existence because these capacities will endure eternally, whereas the physical capacities are, however important, only temporary. Since the soul is not composed of elements, it is not subject to disintegration, i.e., death. The soul, along with its capacities, is immortal. Therefore, we are primarily called upon to bend our efforts to the development of our eternal, enduring spiritual capacities. However, for Bahá'ís this does not imply any denigration of physical capacities or any conflict between physical and spiritual capacities, but rather the proper use of the physical capacities as tools and aids to the process of spiritual growth and development.

The Bahá'í concept of morality--of behavioural norms and value choices-- is closely linked to the Bahá'í concept of human nature and human purpose. The overriding principle of Bahá'í morality can be summarized (with a certain degree of oversimplification, of course) as follows: That which tends to favour the development of human spiritual capacity is good, and that which tends to hinder it is bad.

Having very briefly sketched this picture of the Bahá'í perspective on the human being and human potentiality, I would now like to focus on the Bahá'í perspective on society. Bahá'ís view the process of spiritual development as a profoundly social one. Of course, from a purely empirical point of view, it is clear that the influence of society on the individual is far too pervasive and far too strong not to have a significant effect on such a process. But rather than deploring this influence and sinking into the kind of other-worldly individualism found in some traditional religious theologies, Bahá'ís consider that society is the God-intended matrix in which this eternal process of spiritual development begins. We hold that it is impossible for an individual to develop his

or her spiritual capacities in abstraction from the process by which others are developing their spiritual capacities. In other words, it is through the creation of a just, unified, and progressive social order that spiritual capacities can best be developed.

Thus, for Bahá'ís, the social purpose of man--the purpose of human society --is to create that milieu most favourable to the full and adequate development of the potential of all members of society. From this point of view, social structures, technological innovations, and economic systems, etc. are to be judged relatively good or bad insofar as they are primarily favourable or unfavourable to fostering a social milieu that promotes the development of human potential.

In order to gain a better understanding of how Bahá'ís look at society today, it is perhaps useful to say a few words about the Bahá'í view of history. The Bahá'í writings articulate a certain concept of history that has become known in the Bahá'í community as "progressive revelation." According to this conception, human society constitutes an organic unit that has undergone a collective growth process, which is analogous to the process by which an individual is transformed through successive growth stages from a helpless infant to a mature adult. The individual is born into this world as a dependent, vulnerable bundle of potential. This potential is realized gradually as the individual passes through stages of development; he is an infant, a small child, a large child, a pre- adolescent, and an adolescent, until he finally reaches that stable configuration known as maturity or adulthood. At each stage of this growth process, the individual incorporates all the capacities he has developed at previous stages. In this way, every subsequent growth stage represents a higher level of functioning than any previous one, and maturity represents the highest level of competency of all the stages.

The main features of human adult competency are flexibility and adaptability. Though each of the pre-adult growth stages will have concentrated on the development of some particular facet of human capacity, the adult stage is characterized by its very lack of such specialization, by its many-facetedness.³ For it is in the adult stage that the individual attains a synthesis, an integration, and a unity of all the differentiated abilities previously acquired.

In the same way, Bahá'u'lláh conceived that human history was nothing more nor less than the succession of growth stages in the collective life of humanity. In this view, there was an infancy of mankind, a childhood of mankind, a preadolescence of mankind, and an adolescence of mankind. The current stage of collective human development corresponds to adolescence in the life of the individual, the stage immediately preceding full maturity. It is the most turbulent and troubled period in life, when one seeks to define one's identity. It is characterized by a mature physical development coupled with a relatively immature emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development.

3. This observation allows us to debunk the widely-held notion that sophisticated machines such as computers may eventually outstrip human functioning. Whereas it is clearly possible to build various machines capable of surpassing human performance at various precisely defined tasks (e. g., bulldozers that are stronger than man, automobiles that move faster than man, or computers that can calculate faster than man), there is no evidence that it will ever be possible to build a single machine capable of performing all of the emotional, physical, and intellectual functions of any one normally-endowed human adult.

In the Bahá'í view, the physical or material development of mankind is represented by advances in science and technology, while emotional, spiritual, and intellectual development are represented by the quality and nature of human interactions as well as by just, stable, morally progressive and spiritually adequate forms of social, economic, and political organization. Thus, to say that mankind is currently experiencing its collective adolescence means that modern society is primarily characterized by a relatively high degree of scientific and technological development, coupled with relatively immature forms of social organization and human interaction.

In effecting the transition to full maturity, the essential task confronting adolescent individuals is that of bringing their inner development into balance with their already accomplished physical development. Failure to do so will likely result in misuse of the individual's new-found physical powers in antisocial and/or self-destructive ways. In the Bahá'í view, the essential task confronting humanity today is that of establishing new, adequate, and progressive forms of social organization, based on spiritual principles, so that the fruits of science and technology can be used for the good of all rather than for the advantage of a few and to the detriment of or danger to the many. When these new social forms have been implemented in the proper spirit, humanity will then have attained its collective maturity. Here is one way that Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith until his death in 1957, has expressed this idea:

The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend.⁴

But what form will this "adulthood of humanity" take? According to Bahá'u'lláh, the central thrust of mankind's collective evolution has been the organization and reorganization of human society on progressively higher levels of unity. Each higher level of unity implies a greater degree of specialization of social and economic roles, as well as a correspondingly greater degree of interdependence and mutual

trust among these differentiated parts of society. Thus, the transition from the organization of a society on one level of unity to the reorganization of that society at a higher level of unity involves both new social structures and a new level of individual awareness, a widening of horizons. An individual will accept to devote himself to a highly specialized activity only if he has confidence that, somewhere else in the same society, there are individuals who are producing those vital goods and services he needs but whose production he has relinquished in order to fulfill his differentiated role. Furthermore, he must have confidence that these vital goods and services produced

4. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 2d ed. (Wilmette, Illinois: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), 202.

by others (over whom he has no direct control) will be made available to him on a reasonable basis. Thus, unless the individual is willing to entertain a new quality of relationship with his fellows and to adopt a broader vision of society the reorganization on a higher level of unity will not be possible.

This process of the periodic reorganization of society on progressively higher levels of unity might be compared to the growth of a tree, which must push its roots deeper and grow stronger as its limbs grow upward and outward. If the quantitative outer growth of the limbs is not coupled with the qualitative inner growth of roots and fibers, then the tree will become topheavy and ungainly, and eventually collapse.

Bahá'u'lláh did not see this growth pattern in history as anything like an uninterrupted, linear ascent. Clearly there have been ups and downs, fits and starts, successes and failures. Nevertheless, we know that there was a time some six to ten thousand years ago when social organization was extremely crude and limited, and when our ancestors lived in a condition only slightly above that of animals today. And since that time, human history has seen the gradual emergence of the family, the tribe, the race, the city-state and, finally, the nation as progressively more complex forms of social organization. Indeed, the nation is the basis of social organization in the world today. The contemporary world is a mosaic of nation-states whose relationships with each other are largely characterized by competition and conflict.

Thus, the natural (and we would say inevitable) fulfillment or completion of this history-long growth process is the unification of the nations and peoples of the world into a planetary society. The establishment of world unity is, Bahá'ís believe, the next stage in mankind's social evolution, and it is this unity that represents the maturity or adulthood of the human race. Let us turn again to the writings of Shoghi Effendi on this theme:

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind--the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve--is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope.... Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family.... It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced.... It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world....

It represents the consummation of human evolution--an evolution that has had its earliest beginnings in the birth of family life, its subsequent development in achievement of tribal solidarity, leading in turn to the constitution of the city-state, and expanding later into the institution of independent and sovereign nations.

The principle of the Oneness of Mankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, carries with it no more and no less than a solemn assertion that attainment to this final stage in this stupendous evolution is not only necessary but inevitable, that its realization is fast approaching, and that nothing short of a power that is born of God can succeed in establishing it.⁵

Thus, from the Bahá'í viewpoint, the essential task confronting mankind today is that of effecting the transition from collective adolescence to collective maturity. Practically speaking, this means the establishment of world unity. In the Bahá'í conception, this unity is not just a general feeling of goodwill among the various peoples of the world (however desirable and valuable that may in itself be). Rather, it implies the establishment of potent organs of world government and the implementation of a number of fundamental principles: a universal parliament, with representatives from all nations; a universally recognized international court with final jurisdiction in all disputes between nations; the equality of the sexes; the establishment of a universal auxiliary language, etc.

Bahá'u'lláh taught that, at each stage in the evolution of mankind, the primary force motivating the transition from one level of social organization to another was the appearance in human society of what we call a Manifestation or Revealer of God (the word "Prophet" is also sometimes used). These are the great religious teachers of history such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, and Bahá'u'lláh.⁶ Though there is much in common among the teachings of these founders of religion, and many universal themes are shared by them, each revelation stressed some particular theme and developed thereby certain particular capacities latent within man: Abraham stressed the oneness of God, Moses the principle of rule by law, Jesus the importance of love in human interactions, the Buddha the notion of renunciation of egotistic motives, and so forth.

The unity of humankind is the particular theme of the Bahá'í revelation, and the promulgation of world unity its particular focus--its special contribution to the collective moral consciousness of humanity. Shoghi Effendi has said:

...the object of life to a Bahá'í is to promote the oneness of mankind. The whole object of our lives is bound up with the lives of all human beings; not a personal salvation we are seeking, but a universal one.... Our aim is to produce a world civilization which will in turn react on the character of the individual. It is, in a way, the inverse of Christianity, which started with the individual unit and through it reached out to the conglomerate life of man.⁷

It is important to emphasize here that the Bahá'í conception of unity is not to be identified with uniformity or similarity. Rather, it is unity in diversity-- a unity to be achieved by the universal respect for and safeguarding of that which is particular and precious in every individual and every culture. It implies a new universal consciousness of a total reciprocity among all human beings. This represents a stage beyond even the love that the Christian faith has taught, for love does not necessarily imply reciprocity or equality of relationship.⁸

6. This is not to be regarded as an exhaustive list of the Manifestations, only some salient examples. Indeed, Bahá'u'lláh taught that there were many Manifestations whose names have been lost to history.

7. Shoghi Effendi, quoted in W.S. Hatcher and J.D. Martin, *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 77.

8. I can truly love a being (a dog, for example) without regarding it as my equal. But unity, in the Bahá'í conception, does imply such reciprocity and is therefore applied to the human race.

Moreover, Bahá'u'lláh went far beyond the mere exposition of principles and the articulation of ideas. He proposed new social structures based on consultation, collaboration, and participation--in sharp contrast to the structures of present-day society, which tend to foster competition, dominance of one group over another, and adversarial relationships. For example, He taught that economic enterprises should be organized as total partnerships between the workers and those who provide the capital (whether they be

agencies of the state, private entrepreneurs, or whatever). Besides their salary, the workers should receive a fair percentage of the profits of the enterprise. In this way, all elements of an economic enterprise collaborate as equals and benefit fairly from their contribution to the whole.

In sum, the Bahá'í teachings involve the following elements: an analysis of the ills of present-day society, which are traced primarily to the various forms of disunity that create adversarial or competitive relationships and lead to the domination of one group over another; a vision of the future, i.e., the conception of an organically united world society; and a practical programme for effecting the transition from the present world configuration of conflict and competition to the higher configuration of unity and cooperation. Moreover, all of these elements are placed in an historical perspective in the light of which one understands the present turbulent period as a part (however painful) of the transition from adolescence to adulthood in the collective life of humankind.

I will close with one final quotation, which gives a very succinct but sharply- focussed picture of what Bahá'ís expect to emerge from this process of transition:

The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signaling through its advent the *coming of age of the entire human race*. It should be viewed... as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture... should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop.⁹

9. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 163.