Science and Technology

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Science and Technology

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published in Bahá'í Studies Review8

London: Association for Bahá'í Studies English-Speaking Europe, 1998

In recent years, the perceived divide between science and religion has lessened considerably. Partly, this is due to fear of things nuclear, concern over environmental damage caused by technology, and loss of faith in Marxism and other "scientific" panaceas. Partly, it is an aspect of a larger trend: the growing consciousness that scientific awareness alone, no matter how compelling in its proper sphere, is inadequate to the tasks that a world society, in its teeming complexity, puts before us.

For Bahá'ís, this means that their belief in the harmony of science and religion has become less unique. To contribute to the growing dialogue between science and religion, Bahá'ís must now offer more than the increasingly accepted view that religion is not in conflict with science. This requires a better understanding of Bahá'í teachings concerning the agreement of science and religion, the importance of technological and material progress, and the necessity of concurrent spiritual growth and development. The following quotations from Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, made available by the research department of the House of Justice and drawn from less accessible sources, can contribute to this better understanding. In the paragraphs below, I draw from the Bahá'í writings to give a brief outline of themes relating to science, technology, and religion.

The Bahá'í Faith was born after the scientific and industrial revolutions. Its leading figures were thus intimately aware of the impact of science and technology. Bahá'u'lláh, speaking broadly of science and its applications, strongly emphasised their importance:

To acquire knowledge is incumbent upon all, but of those sciences which may profit the people of the earth, and not such sciences as begin in mere words and end in mere words. The possessors of sciences and arts have a great right among the people of the world.(1)

He makes the acquisition of knowledge and science obligatory for all. At the

same time, usefulness is a criterion(2) and those possessing knowledge are to be accorded respect.

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke extensively about his father's teachings on science. Addressing European and North American audiences knowledgeable about natural science and technology, he strongly emphasised the agreement of science and true religion. Often, he described conformity to the standards of science as a necessary condition for religious truth:

The fourth teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the agreement of religion and science. God has endowed man with intelligence and reason whereby he is required to determine the verity of questions and propositions. If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imaginations.... If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.(3)

'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasised the importance of science for individual and national progress, and for intellectual and material progress:

Science may be likened to a mirror wherein the infinite forms and images of existing things are revealed and reflected. It is the very foundation of all individual and national development. Without this basis of investigation, development is impossible. Therefore seek with diligent endeavour the knowledge and attainment of all that lies within the power of this wonderful bestowal.(4)

He described the acquisition of science as equivalent to worship:

In accordance with the divine teachings the acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts are considered acts of worship. If a man engageth with all his power in the acquisition of a science or in the perfection of an art, it is as if he has been worshipping God in churches and temples.(5)

He portrayed the scientific and technological progress of the modern era as the harbinger of a great, unified world civilisation. Humanity would cast aside its age-old superstitions and prejudices and learn to see, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, all men and women as "citizens of one country" and "leaves of one tree." He also emphasised that scientific and material progress alone are insufficient for humanity to advance. Spiritual advancement and progress are equally necessary:

Through the ingenuity and inventions of man it is possible to cross the wide oceans, fly through the air and travel in submarine depths. At any moment the Orient and Occident can communicate with each other.... Material civilization has reached an advanced plane, but now there is need of spiritual civilization. Material civilization alone will not satisfy; it cannot meet the conditions and requirements of the present age; its benefits are limited to the world of matter.(6)

The advances made by science and technology call for equally great progress in the religious sphere. Thus, the agreement of science and religion is not simply

a matter of peaceful coexistence. Rather, religion and science are both necessary - they correct, balance, and complement each other:

Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.(7)

When religion is brought into conformity with science, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, remarkable things will happen:

When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions, and unintelligent dogmas, shows its conformity with science, then will there be a great unifying, cleansing force in the world which will sweep before it all wars, disagreements, discords and struggles - and then will mankind be united in the power of the Love of God.(8)

Taken together, these and other quotations from the Bahá'í writings suggest that science and religion should not be in conflict, and also that religion should be in conformity with science, and that scientific and technical advancement should be accompanied by progress in the spiritual sphere if we are to advance toward a mature, global civilisation.

Stephen Friberg

End Notes

Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956) 189.
Shoghi Effendi explained that "fruitless excursions into metaphysical hair-splittings" and "theological treatises and commentaries that encumber the human mind rather than help it to attain the truth" are examples of sciences consisting of mere words.
'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982) 181.
Ibid., 50.
'Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 144.
'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace 101.
'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 143.
Ibid., 146.

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Views12655 views since posted 2011-11-28; last edit 2014-11-28 22:25 UTC;

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