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The wise management of all the natural resources of the planet, including water, will require a global approach, since water is not a respecter of national boundaries. The use, sharing, protection and management of water need to be governed by spiritual principles of justice and equity, and the fundamental concept of moderation. Decisions on water need to be taken through processes of consultation involving all those concerned or affected.

CLEAN WATER - CLEANLINESS

Bahá'u'lláh, in his book of laws, gave great importance to clean water and cleanliness, illustrated with some of the problems of polluted water in his native Persia, where in the nineteenth century, the water in public bath-houses and household pools was seldom changed: "Wash ye every soiled thing with water that hath undergone no alteration in any one of the three respects [colour, taste or smell]; take heed not to use water that hath been altered through exposure to the air or to some other agent. Be ye the very essence of cleanliness amongst mankind."

(Bahá'u'lláh,

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pages 46-47)

And again:

"It hath been enjoined upon you to... bathe yourselves each week in water that covereth your bodies, and to clean yourselves with whatsoever ye have formerly employed.... Immerse yourselves in clean water; it is not permissible to bathe yourselves in water that hath already been used. See that ye approach not the public pools of Persian baths; whoso maketh his way toward such baths will smell their fetid odour ere he entereth therein. Shun them, O people, and be not of those who ignominiously accept such vileness. In truth, they are as sinks of foulness and contamination, if ye be of them that apprehend. Avoid ye likewise the malodorous pools in the courtyards of Persian homes, and be ye of the pure and sanctified. Truly, We desire to behold you as manifestations of paradise on earth, that there may be diffused from you such fragrance as shall rejoice the hearts of the favoured of God. If the bather, instead of entering the water, wash himself by pouring it upon his body, it shall be better for him and shall absolve him of the need for bodily immersion." (Bahá'u'lláh,

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, pages 57-58)

When asked at what point water was considered used, Bahá'u'lláh replied:

"Small quantities of water, such as one cupful, or even two or three, must be considered used after a single washing of the face and hands. "But a kurr [ca. 0.5 m³] or more of water remaineth unchanged after one or two washings of the face, and there is no objection to its use unless it is altered in one of the three ways [colour, taste or smell], for example its colour is changed, in which case it should be looked upon as used."

(Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: Questions and Answers, 91, page 133)

Cleanliness through washing with water is seen as having a spiritual

as well as material significance. 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained:

"First in a human being's way of life must be purity, then freshness, cleanliness, and independence of spirit. First must the stream bed be cleansed, then may the sweet river waters be led into it....

"This is why, in Holy Scriptures, the counsels of heaven are likened to water, even as the Qur'án saith: `And pure water send We down from Heaven,' (Qur'án 25:50) and the Gospel: `Except a man be baptized of water and of the spirit, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.' (cf. John 3:5) Thus is it clear that the Teachings which come from God are heavenly outpourings of grace; they are rain-showers of divine mercy, and they cleanse the human heart.

"My meaning is this, that in every aspect of life, purity and holiness, cleanliness and refinement, exalt the human condition and further the development

of man's inner reality. Even in the physical realm, cleanliness will conduce to spirituality, as the Holy Writings clearly state. And although bodily cleanliness is a physical thing, it hath, nevertheless, a powerful influence on the life of the spirit.... The purport is that physical cleanliness doth also exert its effect upon the human soul." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, pages 146-147)

This link of the material and the spiritual is illustrated in a number of religions by the performance of ablutions, or the ritual washing of hands and face with water, before performing prayers or other spiritual acts. In the Bahá'í Faith as well, certain prayers are to be preceded by ablutions.

WATER AS METAPHOR

Many spiritual concepts and teachings are abstractions that are not easy to communicate, especially to those who have not experienced them. Water, with its cleansing and life-giving properties, is thus frequently used in the Bahá'í scriptures as a metaphor and symbol, as illustrated in the following examples:

"O YE SEEMING FAIR YET INWARDLY FOUL! Ye are like clear but bitter water, which to outward seeming is crystal pure but of which, when tested by the divine Assayer, not a drop is accepted. Yea, the sun beam falls alike upon the dust and the mirror, yet differ they in reflection even as doth the star from the earth: nay, immeasurable is the difference!" (Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words (Persian) No. 25, page 25)

"Man is like unto a tree. If he be adorned with fruit, he hath been and will ever be worthy of praise and commendation. Otherwise a fruitless tree is but fit for fire.... Among [the fruits of the human tree] are upright character, virtuous deeds and a goodly utterance.... The Water for these trees is the living water of the sacred Words uttered by the Beloved of the world. In one instant are such trees planted and in the next their branches shall, through the outpourings of the showers of divine mercy, have reached the skies. A dried-up tree, however, hath never been nor will be worthy of any mention." (Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh,

page 257)

This symbolism of water as the Word or Revelation of God occurs frequently in references such as to those who "...quaffed the pure water of reunion from this Cup...", to the "crystal waters of this living Fountain", or to "streams of fresh and soft-flowing waters have gushed from the rocks through the sweetness of the words uttered by your Lord." (Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, paragraphs 80, 50, 54)

'Abdu'l-Bahá explains this symbolism:

"Divine nearness is dependent upon attainment to the knowledge of God, upon severance from all else save God. It is contingent upon self-sacrifice and to be found only through forfeiting wealth and worldly possessions. It is made possible through the baptism of water and fire revealed in the Gospels. Water symbolizes the water of life, which is knowledge, and fire is the fire of the love of God; therefore, man must be baptized with the water of life, the Holy Spirit and the fire of the love of the Kingdom." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, page 147)

He referred to

"...this pure chalice before us, and the Teachings of God, the utterances of God, are like the water. When the glass or chalice is absolutely pure and clear, and the water is perfectly fresh and limpid, then it will confer Life..." (Abdu'l-Bahá, in Music (compilation), page 77)

"Water is the cause of life, and when Christ speaks of water, He is symbolizing that which is the cause of Everlasting Life.

"This life-giving water of which He speaks is like unto fire, for it is none other than the Love of God, and this love means life to our souls." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, page 82)

In conclusion, the following Bahá'í prayer illustrates how the symbolism of life-giving water lends itself to the communication of spiritual significance.

"My God, my Adored One, my King, my Desire! What tongue can voice my thanks to Thee? I was heedless, Thou didst awaken me. I had turned back from Thee, Thou didst graciously aid me to turn towards Thee. I was as one dead, Thou didst quicken me with the water of life. I was withered, Thou didst revive me with the heavenly stream of Thine utterance which hath flowed forth from the Pen of the All-Merciful.

"O Divine Providence! All existence is begotten by Thy bounty; deprive it not of the waters of Thy generosity, neither do Thou withhold it from the ocean of Thy mercy. I beseech Thee to aid and assist me at all times and under all conditions, and seek from the heaven of Thy grace Thine ancient favor. Thou art, in truth, the Lord of bounty, and the Sovereign of the kingdom of eternity." (Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations CLXXIII, pages 264-265)

* The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Environment Programme.

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