

THE WORLD ORDER OF NATURE

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WE seem so small in relation to the natural world that it has always appeared unlimited. Yet the environmental problems currently making the headlines — toxic wastes, accumulating carbon dioxide, holes in the ozone layer, acid rain, nuclear reactor accidents — underline the fact that our technological development and growing population are now affecting natural systems at a world scale.

What is less evident, but perhaps more alarming in the long term, is the world crisis in the conservation of nature. The natural areas that once clothed the planet are steadily eroding under pressures from our rapidly expanding population. The rich and the poor both contribute to the problem: the rich through their headlong rush for economic development, and the masses of the poor through their desperate efforts to eke out a living from diminishing resources.

The biosphere, that thin layer of air, water and soil surrounding the earth that supports all life, is a single, complex, interrelated system. The conditions that keep our planet surface a suitable environment for living things were in part created, and are maintained by, life itself. We are far from understanding how these systems work, but as much as we would like to overlook the fact, it is increasingly evident that we depend on these natural systems of the biosphere for our very survival. It has also become alarmingly apparent that, at the present rate of destruction, much of the natural heritage of the earth may be irretrievably lost within a few decades.

The climates are changing, forests are being cleared, soils are washing away, deserts are expanding, fisheries are declining or collapsing, and pollution is spreading. As a result, the wild species that maintain the balance of natural systems and represent most

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of the earth's genetic resources accumulated over millions of years are being driven to extinction in increasing numbers. As long as significant fragments of natural areas remain to harbour such species, there is always the hope that a wiser and more stable society could maintain and even restore the natural richness of the planet. It is those last fragments of natural ecosystems that are now threatened in many places. When they are gone, many species and potential resources will be lost forever, and it will prove more difficult to maintain or restore balanced natural systems.

These are the symptoms of a civilization that has gone out of control and is heading for self-destruction.

The Bahá'í teachings place this and the other grave problems facing the world today in a broader perspective which both accounts for their origin and suggests practical solutions. Technological progress has confronted the peoples and institutions of the nation-States with the reality of a physically united world, but their behaviour and values have yet to adapt to this fundamental change. Science and technology have greatly magnified our impacts on the environment to the extent that they affect the whole planet, yet each nation still insists on its sovereign right to exploit and destroy its natural resources and dispose of its wastes, regardless of the consequences for neighbouring countries or the rest of the world. For the Bahá'ís, therefore, the problem is basically spiritual: all people must come to accept the oneness of mankind, as 'the first fundamental prerequisite for the reorganization and administration of the world as one country.'¹ Without such a spiritual solution, other measures can only be temporary palliatives; solve the fundamental spiritual problem, and the difficulties of the world will resolve themselves naturally. The biosphere can only be managed within the context of a new world order built on universal values.

The Natural World System

The unity underlying natural systems has become one of the tenets of modern science. It is also fundamental to the view of the world expressed in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and of his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which reflect the basic harmony of science and religion. The origins of the universe are described in the Bahá'í writings in terms that correspond well with present scientific

theories, even though written before many of these theories and the physical and chemical terminologies used to describe them were developed. The endless universe is seen as having neither beginning nor end.²

That which hath been in existence had existed before, but not in the form though seest today. The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient.³

This description is quite close to that of the functioning of stars through fusion reactions involving positive and negative forces as understood by modern physics. Individual celestial bodies may coalesce or disintegrate without upsetting the perpetual order of the universe.⁴ A single original state of matter differentiated into the different chemical elements with stable forms and their own particular characteristics. These elements combined to form an infinite variety of molecules which, through their many combinations, form and disintegrate in complex reactions which have led to existence and life as we know it today.⁵ The earth came into existence through these universal processes and evolved gradually to its present condition where it can support innumerable forms of life in a complex organized system.⁶

Nature is seen as following scientific laws that are themselves the expression of a divine reality. 'Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world.'⁷ And further:

This Nature is subjected to an absolute organization, to determined laws, to a complete order and to a finished design, from which it will never depart — to such a degree, indeed, that if you look carefully and with keen sight, from the smallest invisible atom up to such large bodies of the world of existence as the globe of the sun or the other great stars and luminous spheres, whether you regard their arrangement, their composition, their form or their movement, you will find that all are in the highest degree of organization and are under one law from which they will never depart.⁸

Nature is defined as those inherent properties and necessary relations underlying the realities of all things. All natural beings, though highly diverse, are intimately connected with each other.⁹ Different levels of natural organization are distinguished. Minerals are composed of various combinations of elements; plants

have in addition the capacity for growth; animals are further distinguished by sense perceptions; and humans are the highest specialized organism of the physical creation, with the qualities of the mineral, vegetable and animal plus an endowment totally lacking in the lower forms — the power of intellectual investigation into the mysteries of nature. The outcome of this intellectual process is science, the unique human characteristic, which reveals the nature and laws of the universe. The attainment of scientific knowledge is thus humankind's most noble and praiseworthy accomplishment.¹⁰

The Bahá'í writings accept the scientific evidence for evolution. However, they make the distinction between the potential for all types of beings, which is inherent in the substance and laws of the natural world and has thus always existed, and the process by which that potential is revealed.

... as man in the womb of the mother passes from form to form, from shape to shape, changes and develops, and is still the human species from the beginning of the embryonic period — in the same way man, from the beginning of his existence in the matrix of the world, is also a distinct species, that is, man — and has gradually evolved from one form to another.¹¹

The gradual growth and development of all beings is a basic characteristic of natural systems.¹² As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained further, 'All beings, whether large or small, were created perfect and complete from the first, but their perfections appear in them by degrees.'¹³

Thus, the evolution of existence is the expression of a single divine system of organization. The endless beings which inhabit the world, whether human, animal, vegetable, or mineral, are expressions of relative perfection composed of elements combined in appropriate ways and proportions through processes involving other beings. All beings are connected together like a chain. Reciprocal interactions and influences are among their essential properties, causing the existence, development and growth of created beings.¹⁴ The natural world is therefore in its very essence a single interrelated system. The scientific discovery of the universality of the genetic code has demonstrated that all living things are related and have descended from the same origin.

The concepts of essential ecological processes and life-support systems also appear in the Bahá'í writings.

Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. In other words, the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness.¹⁵

In the physical realm of creation, all things are eaters and eaten: the plant drinketh in the mineral, the animal doth crop and swallow down the plant, man doth feed upon the animal, and the mineral devoureth the body of man. Physical bodies are transferred past one barrier after another, from one life to another, and all things are subject to transformation and change, save only the essence of existence itself — since it is constant and immutable, and upon it is founded the life of every species and kind, of every contingent reality throughout the whole of creation.¹⁶

Human beings have a special place in the natural world. While the human body is, like the animal's, subject to natural laws, a human being's second reality, the rational or intellectual reality, predominates over nature,¹⁷ and gives him or her the power to guide, control and overcome nature.¹⁸ There is in addition a third reality in each person, the spiritual reality, which delivers us from the material world. Escaping from the world of nature, we find an illuminating reality, transcending the limited reality of humankind with our superstitions and imaginations, and leading to the infinitude of God.¹⁹ Humankind should be freed from the world of nature, for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal, as the struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature.²⁰

The Bahá'í view of the origins of the natural world and of our place in it accords fully with the evidence of modern science. The

underlying theme of the interrelationships of all things demonstrates the importance of wise conservation and management of the biosphere. The fact that we can interfere with and control nature also gives us the responsibility to manage nature wisely. However conservation problems are not rooted in any lack of a scientific understanding of nature, they result largely from the social and structural problems of present day society. The Bahá'í Faith provides social perspectives which are equally important to the problem of the conservation of nature.

Threats to the World System

The scientific and technological revolution of the last 150 years have transformed the nature of civilization and the means at our disposal to meet our needs and desires. However, the major environmental problems now threatening the planet suggest that our material civilization in its present form may not be sustainable. While the basic social aim of humanity is to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization,²¹ the form that such progress takes is open to question. Our present value systems have become highly materialistic. Development is measured in the economic terms of goods and services, with little attention paid to other aspects of the quality of life. The very institutions and structures of our society reflect this. Industrial enterprises and multinational corporations hold much of the power in western society; it is only with great difficulty that even the strongest governments succeed in limiting their impacts on the environment. The extreme poverty in which the masses of the developing countries are maintained drives them to destroy the very resources on which they depend for survival.

Bahá'u'lláh warned more than a hundred years ago about the hazards to the planet of too much material civilization.

The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men . . . If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation . . . The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities . . .²²

In a reference that could well apply to nuclear energy, but written long before its discovery, he wrote:

Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth but they are hidden from the minds and the understanding of men. These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal.²³

The pollution and resource problems of today bear out these warnings. Obviously the civilization of the future must seek out a more moderate balance between material development and the requirements of the natural world.

The destruction of the natural resource base of the biosphere has two distinct origins: the over exploitation required to meet the high market demands in the wealthy countries, and the erosion of resources by the masses of the poor in their desperate bid to survive. Both are symptoms of the serious imbalances in the distribution of wealth on a world basis. The population problem itself is largely a result of an unstable intermediate state in which much of the world's population is maintained by the present world system. Sufficient modern medical knowledge has been shared to lower death rates, but not enough wealth has been shared to raise standards of living enough to lower birth rates. The roots of the world environmental crisis thus lie in the defects of the present world system.

Solving such problems will require changes in the basic values and structures of society. The injustices that maintain extremes of wealth and poverty and drive the poor to destroy their resources must be resolved through a combination of spiritual, moral and practical approaches.²⁴ Universal education would allow the masses of the people to understand and modify their behaviour. At the same time, the inordinate consumption of resources by the wealthy must be controlled.

World Approaches to Environmental Management

The environmental systems of the biosphere function on a global scale; they can only be managed on a global basis. The limitations of national sovereignty in this respect are particularly apparent. The present global environmental anarchy must be replaced by new structures and approaches at the scale of the problems.

The necessary changes will require fundamental alterations in the structure of human society. The Bahá'í teachings provide guidelines for the kind of transformation necessary to achieve a new world order.

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. . . . The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated . . .

. . . economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to increase the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.²⁵

Note that such a world federal system would control the entire resources of all the nations, would tap and fully utilize the sources of raw materials and regulate the distribution of products, and would aim to exploit the unused and unsuspected resources and all available sources of energy on the surface of the planet. With the abolition of economic barriers and restrictions, the world economy would finally become a globally balanced and effective system, in which each component part would produce what it can most efficiently, given its situation and resources. Only such a

system would be able to manage the life support systems of the biosphere and to implement a world strategy for the conservation of nature.

Sustainable development would be fundamental to such a civilization. Unlike today's almost exclusive reliance on short-term planning, the Bahá'ís are laying the foundations for the first thousand years of a cycle which should last five hundred thousand years. The economy of such a society would have to work on a fully-sustainable basis, using renewable or recyclable resources and highly efficient resource utilization.

The Bahá'í Attitude towards Nature

Humanity will only be willing to move towards a new world order with nature if it prizes the values that nature represents. The importance of the natural world must become rooted in the fundamental moral and spiritual values of society. The Bahá'í Faith proposes a value system that integrates the scientific and spiritual views of the world, and gives an important place to nature and to respect for ecological principles.

For Bahá'ís, while nature is not an end in itself to be worshipped and adored,²⁶ the creation does reflect the qualities and attributes of God.

When . . . thou dost contemplate the innermost essence of all things, and the individuality of each, thou wilt behold the signs of thy Lord's mercy in every created thing, and see the spreading rays of His Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being . . . Then wilt thou observe that the universe is a scroll that discloseth His hidden secrets, which are preserved in the well-guarded Tablet. And not an atom of all the atoms in existence, not a creature from amongst the creatures but speaketh His praise and telleth of His attributes and names, revealeth the glory of His might and guideth to His oneness and His mercy . . .

And whensoever thou dost gaze upon creation all entire, and dost observe the very atoms thereof, thou wilt note that the rays of the Sun of Truth are shed upon all things and shining within them, and telling of that Day-Star's splendours, Its mysteries, and the spreading of Its lights. Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them.²⁷

The contemplation of nature thus has a spiritual significance for Bahá'ís. Indeed the spiritual, social and physical environments are all interrelated.

We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions.²⁸

The genetic diversity that underlies the richness of living things is thus a reflection of the qualities of God. Bahá'ís are encouraged to appreciate such diversity, whether in humanity or in the natural world.

Consider the world of created beings, how varied and diverse they are in species, yet with one sole origin. All the differences that appear are those of outward form and colour. This diversity of type is apparent throughout the whole of nature . . .

Let us look . . . at the beauty in diversity, the beauty of harmony, and learn a lesson from the vegetable creation. If you behold a garden in which all the plants were the same as to form, colour and perfume, it would not seem beautiful to you at all, but, rather monotonous and dull. The garden which is pleasing to the eye and which makes the heart glad, is the garden in which are growing side by side flowers of every hue, form and perfume, and the joyous contrast of colour is what makes for charm and beauty. So is it with trees. An orchard full of fruit trees is a delight; so is a plantation planted with many species of shrubs. It is just the diversity and variety that constitutes its charm; each flower, each tree, each fruit, beside being beautiful in itself, brings out by contrast the qualities of the others, and shows to advantage the special loveliness of each and all.²⁹

This same principle of diversity is fundamental to the efficiency and stability of most natural ecosystems. Respect for the material world and moderation in the use of its resources are also reflected in the Bahá'í prohibition of cruelty to animals.

Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature . . . The feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast. Train

your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. If an animal be sick, let the children try to heal it, if it be hungry, let them feed it, if thirsty, let them quench its thirst, if weary, let them see that it rests.³⁰

Similarly, we are counselled

Unless ye must
Bruise not the serpent in the dust
How much less wound a man.
And if ye can
No ant should ye alarm
Much less a brother harm.³¹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá said of his father during his imprisonment, ‘Bahá’u’lláh loved the beauty and verdure of the country. One day He passed the remark: “I have not gazed on verdure for nine years. The country is the world of the soul, the city is the world of bodies.”’³² Once Bahá’u’lláh was free to leave the prison, he often used to pitch his tent among the trees on the side of Mount Carmel.

In many religions, including the Bahá’í Faith, the founders or leaders have retired to the wilderness for meditation and contemplation prior to taking on the burdens of their message, or for spiritual renewal. Bahá’u’lláh spent two years in the mountains, where ‘the birds of the air were my companions and the beasts of the field My associates . . .’³³ and Shoghi Effendi, the late Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith, found for himself a partial healing from the weight of his responsibilities high in the Swiss Alps.³⁴

Bahá’ís thus approach nature with an awareness of the inter-relatedness of themselves and the natural world, with an indication of the importance of all the world’s resources for the civilization they are building, and with the example of their leaders showing the ecological, spiritual and aesthetic values of wilderness, the countryside, and the diversity of natural life.

Building a World Order in Support of Nature

The goals for the protection of the world’s vital interests in nature have been spelled out in the World Conservation Strategy.³⁵ They are: to maintain essential ecological processes and life-support systems, to preserve genetic diversity, and to ensure the

sustainable utilization of species and ecosystems. The report of the UN World Commission on Environment and Development³⁶ has also highlighted the importance of sustainable development for the future of the planet. But as with many global undertakings in today's fragmented world, these prescriptions suffer from the lack of world-scale institutions capable of implementing them. Action at the national level will never be more than a partial solution to world problems. The establishment of the world commonwealth anticipated in the Bahá'í writings will finally make world management and conservation of the resources of the biosphere possible.

There is thus no special solution to today's problems of nature and the environment, any more than the problems of peace or international economic instability can be solved in isolation. The human race must first recognize its oneness on a world scale and then build the new institutions needed to reflect that oneness in world organization. Change in both basic values and structures are necessary. As such changes are implemented, it will be possible to begin the long and complex process of learning how to correct the imbalances in the systems of the biosphere and to manage them for our long-term survival.

At the same time, new approaches to sustainable development in harmony with natural resources will need to be evolved at the local and national levels. This essentially means rebuilding the very foundations of civilization along patterns that are ecologically sound and more in harmony with both humanity and nature. Guiding principles such as those set out in the Bahá'í Faith can set the direction, but an enormous scientific effort will be necessary to identify the means, and new institutional structures will be required to put them into practice. Again the material and spiritual aspects must be in balance; science can provide the practical solutions, but only spiritual principles can provide sufficient motivation to implement them.

The existing Bahá'í communities around the world are a pilot-scale experiment of the kind of transformation required. They demonstrate that such new approaches to world order can go beyond utopian idealism, and have the capacity to become a practical reality. The natural world order of the biosphere can thus find its parallel in a new world order of humanity.

NOTES

1. The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace: A Statement by the Universal House of Justice* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 17.
2. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* comp. and trans. Laura Clifford Barney, 5th ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 180.
3. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh and others, re. ed. (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), p. 140.
4. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 180-1.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 181-2.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 182-3.
7. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 142.
8. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 3.
9. See 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 'Tablet to Dr. August Henri Forel', in *The Bahá'í World*, vol. XV (1968-73) (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), pp. 37-43.
10. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956), p. 242.
11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 193-4.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-9.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-9.
15. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Conservation of the Earth's Resources* comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989), p. 4.
16. 'Abdu'l-Bahá *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Marzieh Gail and others, rev. ed. (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982), p. 157.
17. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity: Compiled from Addresses and Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968), p. 51.
18. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks: Addresses Given By 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912*, 11th ed. (London, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 122.
19. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 51.
20. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, p. 302.
21. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* trans. Shoghi Effendi, 2nd rev. ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1976), p. 215.
22. Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith*, pp. 138-9.
23. Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, p. 69.
24. The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, p. 13.
25. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*, 2nd rev. ed. (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974), pp. 203-4.
26. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 123.
27. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, pp. 41-2.
28. Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *Conservation of the Earth's Resources*, p. 15.

29. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pp. 51-3.
30. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections*, pp. 158-9.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
32. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in J. E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 35.
33. Bahá'u'lláh, in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970), p. 120.
34. Rúhíyyih Rabbání, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969), p. 120.
35. IUCN/WWF/UNEP, *World Conservation Strategy* (Gland, Switzerland: International Union for Conservation of Nature, 1980).
36. World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).