

The Unity between Eastern and Western Spiritual Traditions

Anjam Khursheed

One of our great aims as Bahá'ís is to bring people of all religions together in a spirit of harmony and fellowship. Bahá'u'lláh refers to it as a "decree of God",

"O people! Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. Thus hath the day-star of His sanction and authority shone forth above the horizon of the decree of God, the Lord of the worlds." (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, page 22)

The Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith makes our aim and purpose with respect to other religions very clear,

"The Revelation, of which Bahá'u'lláh is the source and center, abrogates none of the religions that have preceded it, nor does it attempt, in the slightest degree, to distort their features or to belittle their value. It disclaims any intention of dwarfing any of the Prophets of the past, or of whittling down the eternal verity of their teachings. It can, in no wise, conflict with the spirit that animates their claims, nor does it seek to undermine the basis of any man's allegiance to their cause. Its declared, its primary purpose is to enable every adherent of these Faiths to obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose. It is neither eclectic in the presentation of its truths, nor arrogant in the affirmation of its claims. Its teachings revolve around the fundamental principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is progressive, not final. Unequivocally and without the least reservation it proclaims all established religions to be divine in origin, identical in their aims, complementary in their functions, continuous in their purpose, indispensable in their value to mankind."¹

This passage not only makes it clear that all religions, including the Bahá'í Faith, have "identical aims", are "complementary in their functions", and are "indispensable in their value to mankind", but that the Bahá'í Faith must assist someone of another Faith to "obtain a fuller understanding of the religion with which he stands identified, and to acquire a clearer apprehension of its purpose". This means that Bahá'ís are not in competition with members of other Faiths, vying for spiritual converts. Neither do they seek to "undermine the basis of any man's allegiance" to his or her own spiritual tradition.

The relationship of the Bahá'í Faith to other religions and the nature of progressive revelation is further elaborated in another passage by Shoghi Effendi. Here the danger of relegating other religions to an inferior status is explicitly highlighted, and the fundamental unity of the Bahá'í Faith to all religions is described in terms of the "evolution of one religion",

“Nor does the Bahá’í Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfilment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it. The God-given authority, vested in each one of them, it admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis. It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part...Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world’s religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to co-ordinate their functions and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations. These divinely-revealed religions, as a close observer has graphically expressed it, “are doomed not to die, but to be reborn...”²

The Bahá’í approach is one that emphasizes the underlying unity behind all religions. It cannot compete with other Faiths because it believes all religions, including itself, to be part of an “evolution of one religion”. It aims at “restating the fundamentals” of each Faith, to “reconcile their aims”, to “reinvigorate their life”, to “demonstrate their oneness”, to “restore the pristine purity of their teachings” and to “assist in the realization of their highest aspirations”. The task facing Bahá’ís is to bring about the rebirth of the other religions, not to supersede them. This point cannot be overemphasized. Clearly the goal of establishing the unity of religions will involve Bahá’ís and people of other religions working together. This means each religion will have a part to play in the spiritual future of mankind.

It is in this spirit that I will be talking about the unity of Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. By Western traditions, I am referring to the Semitic line of religions consisting of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. By Eastern traditions I am referring to religions like Hinduism and Buddhism.

Now there is a common distinction that scholars of religion make between these two traditions. They refer to the Western spiritual tradition as being “dualist” and usually contrast it with the Eastern tradition which is referred to as “monist”. What does “dualism” and “monism” mean here? They are general designations that encompass beliefs about man, God and Man’s purpose in life, but I in this talk will specifically focus on them in relation to human nature.

Let me give some examples of Western dualism. In Christianity, man is typically described as half animal and half angel. The apostle St Paul describes it as a conflict in human nature, “my inner being delights in the law of God. But I see a different law at work in my body - a law that fights against which my mind approves of” (Romans 7: 22-23). St Paul in the same letter, refers to human nature as being intrinsically bound by “sin” (Romans 7:18-20). This kind of description of human beings in terms of a good and bad (sinful) self has been passed down by generations and generations of Christians. In Islam and Judaism similar situation exists. They describe the good side to human beings as the part which is “made in the image of God” (Genesis 1:26), while the sinful self is the part associated with the body.

Eastern monism on the other hand concentrates on rising above dualism. Take for instance the following passage from the Upanishads in the Hindu tradition,

“For where there is any semblance of duality, then does one smell another, then does one see another, then does one hear another, then does one speak to another, then does one think of another, then does one understand another. But when all has become one’s very Self, then with what should one smell whom? With what should one see whom? With what should one hear whom? With what should one speak to whom? With what should one think of whom? With what should one understand whom? With what should one understand Him by whom one understands this whole universe? With what indeed should one understand the Understander?”
(2: 4:12-14 Brhadaranyaka Upanishad)

Now this kind of passage has caused much confusion. Based upon such passages many Hindus claim that the goal of life is to become identical with God until our own selves disappear and we become the unitary “Self”. This of course seems to be in conflict with the Semitic religions that teach that man is a reflection of God and that the two are inherently very different.

In Buddhism also, the goal of life is depicted in terms of rising above dualism. In fact one of the main doctrines of Buddhism is to deny the existence of a “self”. Take for instance the Buddha’s words,

“The existence of self is an illusion, and there is no wrong in this world, no vice, no evil, except what flows from the assertion of self”³.

This kind of passage has led to the widespread belief among Buddhists that there is no individual self in human beings, no individual soul, which is also in apparent conflict with the teachings of the Semitic religions.

Since it is our task to unite religions, it is natural for us to ask if the Bahá’í Faith is dualist or monist? The answer to this question is extremely interesting, since it not only helps us to gain a deeper understanding of the Bahá’í teachings, but also enables us to see a possible way by which the Bahá’í teachings can become a bridge uniting Eastern and Western spiritual traditions. As we survey Bahá’í scripture there seem to be both monist and dualist passages concerning human nature. Take for instance the following passage by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,

“Man is the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality - that is to say he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light; that is why it has been said that the condition of man is the end of the night and the beginning of day. He has an animal side as well as an angelic side... Not in any other of the species in the world of existence is there such a difference, contrast, contradiction and opposition as in the species of man”⁴.

Here an animal self is described to be in opposition to a spiritual self. On the other hand, in The Seven Valleys, Bahá’u’lláh describes the search for God culminating in the spiritual condition of the self being annihilated,

“Yea, all he hath, from heart to skin, will be set aflame, so that nothing will remain save the Friend”⁵

Now this apparent contradiction can be resolved by other passages which explicitly state that human nature has three aspects. Take for instance ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s following words,

“There are in the world of humanity three degrees; those of the body, the soul, and spirit. The body is the physical or animal degree of man. From the bodily point of view man is a sharer of the animal kingdom. The bodies alike of men and animals are composed of elements held together by the law of attraction. Like the animal, man possesses the faculties of the senses, is subject to heat, cold, hunger, thirst, etc.; unlike the animal, man has a rational soul, the human intelligence. This intelligence of man is the intermediary between his body and his spirit. When man allows the spirit, through his soul, to enlighten his understanding, then does he contain all Creation; because man, being the culmination of all that went before and thus superior to all previous evolutions, contains all the lower world within himself. Illumined by the spirit through the instrumentality of the soul, man’s radiant intelligence makes him the crowning-point of Creation”⁶.

This passage clarifies many aspects about the Bahá’í approach to human nature. The world of the body and soul are united and have their common origin in a third world, the world of the Spirit. The world of God here is something akin to the Christian Holy Spirit. It is the spiritual power and influence of God and his Manifestations. Man’s spiritual life and intelligence is dependent on the rays of God’s Holy Spirit. The world of the Spirit is the common ground upon which the body and mind of man stand. It is the underlying monism behind the apparent dualism and the uniting link between body and mind, through its aid, mind and body are harmonized. I will refer to this approach as a tripartite one, where dualism is given meaning and unity by an underlying monism.

By using the Bahá’í tripartite approach to human nature, there is a possible way to resolve the apparent conflict between Eastern monism and Western dualism.

Although not as explicitly stated in the Bahá’í writings, there are also unmistakable signs of there being an underlying monism which supports and gives unity to dualism in other religions. In Christianity, it is the Holy Spirit which joins itself to our individual spirits,

“The Spirit gives one person a message full of wisdom, while to another person the same Spirit gives a message full of knowledge. One and the same Spirit gives faith to one person, while to another person he gives the power to heal... But it is one and the same Spirit who does all this; as he wishes. He gives a different gift to each person. (1 Corinthians 12:8-11)

Here, the sinful and angelic nature of the Christian are united and transcended by the Holy Spirit.

In Judaism human nature and the physical world are directly dependent on God. It is the “breath of God” which gives man life, and it is the return of this breath to God which causes death,

“Lord, you have made so many things! How wisely you made them all! The earth is filled with your creatures. There is ocean, large and wide; where countless creatures live, large and small alike... All of them depend on you to give them food when they need it. You give it to them, and they eat it; you provide food, and they are satisfied. When you turn away, they are afraid; when you take away your breath, they die and go back to the dust from which they came. But when you give them breath, they are created; you give new life to the earth.” (Psalms 104: 24-30)

The physical world and human nature have their unity in the breath of God. From the above Old Testament passages, it is clear that the breath of God overcomes the dualism between man and nature. The tripartite character of human nature is implicit.

In the Koran the soul of man is also described in terms of God's breath, “Behold! Thy Lord said to the angels: I am about to create man, from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape. When I have fashioned him in due proportion and breathed into him of My Spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him...” (S 15:28-29), or “He has written Faith in their hearts, and strengthened them with a spirit from Himself” (S 58:22). God is ever present in human beings, “We are nearer to him to than his jugular vein” (S 50:16). This presence of God extends to signs which are also apparent in the physical world, “We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves” (S 41:53). So it is God who is the bridge between the physical world and human nature. Since the soul of man is filled with the spirit and breath of God, the nature of the soul in Islam cannot be separated from God.

In Buddhism, there are statements of a dualist kind. The challenge to overcome self for instance, is likened by Buddha to be like fighting a battle,

“If a man makes himself as he teaches others to be, then, being himself subdued, he may subdue others; one's self is indeed difficult to subdue. If some men conquer in battle a thousand times a thousand men, and if another conquer himself; he (the latter) is the greatest of conquerors”⁷.

This passage is similar to those already cited from the Christian apostle St Paul. Elsewhere, although Buddha denies self, he proclaims the reality of the mind,

“The Tathagata teaches that there is no self. He who says that the soul is his self and that the self is the thinker of our thoughts and the actor of our deeds, teaches a wrong doctrine which leads to confusion and darkness. On the other hand, the Tathagata teaches that there is mind. He who understands by soul mind, and says that mind exists, teaches the truth which leads to clearness and enlightenment”⁸.

The three elements of human nature in Buddhism are Body, Mind and Truth. Truth or Tathagata, as it is sometimes referred to, is described in a very similar way to the Holy Spirit of the Semitic line of religions.

In the Upanishads of Hinduism, it is the Atman that is God's Spirit in man, that is the uniting link between the body and soul of man. The Atman is likened to be the passenger of a chariot, reason is symbolised by the charioteer and the horses represent the bodily senses,

“Know the Atman as Lord of a chariot; and the body as the chariot itself. Know that reason is the charioteer; and the mind indeed is the reins. The horses, they say, are the senses; and their paths are the objects of sense. When the soul becomes one with the mind and the senses he is called ‘one who has joys and sorrows’. He who has not right understanding and whose mind is never steady is not the ruler of his life, like a bad driver with wild horses. But he who has right understanding and whose mind is ever steady is the ruler of his life, like a good driver with well-trained horses. He who has not right understanding, is careless and never pure, reaches not the End of the journey; but wanders on from death to death. But, he who has understanding, is careful and ever pure, reaches the End of the journey, from which he never returns”⁹.

This elaborate analogy clearly can be interpreted in a tripartite way. The body is the chariot, while reason, represented by the charioteer, roughly corresponds to the soul of the Semitic religions. The Atman, that is the “Lord of the chariot”, who is seated in the chariot, parallels the Holy Spirit of Christianity, or the world of the spirit in the Bahá'í Faith, or the Truth or Tathagata in Buddhism. This Hindu chariot analogy corresponds particularly well to the Bahá'í metaphor of the soul being on a journey. The Lord of the chariot, that is the Atman, sets the direction for the charioteer of reason. The Atman is a guide for human reason, just as the Holy Spirit is the guide for the individual soul in Christianity.

There are of course many more parallels that can be taken, but the few examples quoted here serve to illustrate the point that dualism is founded on an underlying monism. This approach to human nature is explicitly articulated in Bahá'í scripture and implicitly present in the writings of many other religions. In the future, it may become a principle on which the spiritual traditions of the West and East can unite.

References

- 1 Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pages 57-58.
- 2 Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pages 114-116.
- 3 *The Gospel of Buddha*, compiled by Paul Carus, One World Publications 1994, Oxford, UK, page 41.
- 4 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, pages 235-6.
- 5 Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys*, page 36.
- 6 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, pages 96-97.
- 7 *The Gospel of Buddha*, compiled by Paul Carus, One World Publications 1994, Oxford, UK, page 132.
- 8 *The Gospel of Buddha*, compiled by Paul Carus, One World Publications 1994, Oxford, UK, page 151.
- 9 *Katha Upanishad*, Part 3, page 60, *The Upanishads*, Penguin Classics.