



Introduction

Whenever the Bahá'í literature mentions the fundamental principles of the Bahá'í Faith, a post-modern universal religion, it invariably lists the free and independent search after truth first. This is the starting point of the spiritual life of any individual. If a person is not eager to discover the secrets of life and does not make an effort to unravel them, the gates of the spiritual worlds are closed in front of him and his life remains confined within the narrow spaces of the natal self – the limited psycho-physical entity born from the interaction between a human body and the rational soul to which that body has been assigned which will enable the soul to return as a conscious entity to those spiritual worlds from which it has come as an unconscious entity. Although such a person may be physically alive and active in the physical world, he is dead as to his spiritual evolution – defining death as the ‘death of unbelief’ (Bahá'u'lláh, *Íqán* 113), the condition of ‘those whose lips have tasted not the ethereal cup of true knowledge, and whose hearts have been deprived of the grace of the holy Spirit in their day’ (ibid. 118).

There is another Bahá'í principle which is as relevant with respect to social life as the free and independent search after truth is important with respect to the life of the individual. This is the principle of harmony between science and religion. Science and religion are two systems of thought equally important in view of the development of civilization. Science investigates and discovers the secrets of the world of nature and through its discoveries enables human beings to produce useful instruments for the development of civilization. Religion reveals verities of the spiritual worlds that enable human beings to understand themselves and their lives. Religion also reveals the direction towards which human beings should move if they want to actualize the best potentialities of their nature. Both these two systems of thought describe reality, although they do it from different perspectives. Therefore they cannot conflict with one another. If there is a conflict between them, there must have been a mistake in the interpretation of the data either of science or of scripture, the depositories of the teachings of religion. This conflict should be resolved,

otherwise society will go towards either materialism or superstition, which are two very dangerous conditions for the life of both individuals and societies.

This collection of papers by Professor Rhett Diessner, psychologist at the Lewis-Clark State College of Lewiston, Idaho, published under the title of *Psyche and Eros: Studies in a Spiritual Psychology*, is particularly significant in this respect because it promotes both these Bahá'í principles. It promotes the free and independent search after truth because it deals with psychology, a science that investigates and describes the inner reality of human beings, the soul. And undoubtedly the first reality human beings need to know, if they want to live a proficient life on earth, is their own reality, their soul. It promotes the principle of harmony between science and religion because it investigates each subject in the perspective of both the results of the scientific studies of modern specialists and the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, in whose bosom Professor Diessner has been reared by his family and whose principles he accepted as a young man. The final result of these efforts is a book of spiritual psychology, which its author defines as 'an emerging field within the new paradigm of applied spirituality', a 'new area of study and research [that] focuses on the perspective that true human development and civilization is only possible when scientific research and technological advancement are harmonized with universal spiritual principles and ethical practices'.

The book is divided into 11 chapters. The first chapter, entitled 'The Image of the Manifestation as the Ontological Basis for a Bahá'í Psychology: Oneness as Absolute Oneness and Oneness as Unity-in-Diversity', describes the ontological foundations of Professor Diessner's vision of human reality. This paper hypothesizes that since God can have 'no comparison or likeness', when scripture states that human beings are created in the image of God, it means in the image of the Manifestation of God, 'the Manifestation of the Excellent Names, and the Source of the attributes, of the true God . . . His Vicegerent amongst men' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Epistle* 118), the Prophet-Founders of the universal religions. Therefore human beings cannot either understand or express absolute oneness, a reality that pertains to God alone. They can understand and express a lower form of oneness, that can be defined as unity-in-diversity. Human beings can understand and mirror forth 'the radiance of all . . . [the] names and attributes' of God and this station in which all the names and attributes of God are understood and expressed in the greatest harmony is the highest stage of development they can attain. This essay introduces the readers to the concept of

unity-in-diversity as a fundamental aspect of human nature. Later on the author will describe unity-in-diversity as a fundamental aspect of moral beauty.

The second chapter, ‘Action Research’, describes the importance of ‘research for action, change, transformation’, a research that places its ‘main emphasis . . . on improving the human condition in a specific context, with secondary attention given to generalizing the findings’. Since it is democratic, consultative and based on bilateral communication and, at the same time, critical and emancipatory, action research is fit for spiritual psychology, whose goals are not only understanding human spiritual reality but also developing its potentialities in such a way as to be translated into useful action. This essay upholds the importance of a lesser distance between researchers and the problems under study and defends a less theoretical and more practical approach, convincing that as beautiful as a thought may be, if it is not translated into action, it is fruitless.

The third chapter, ‘Developmental Psychology Made New: Glimmerings from Spiritual Psychology’, reinterprets critical questions central to the discipline of developmental psychology on the ground of spiritual psychology. The basic nature of humans is identified as the soul, ‘the first among all created things to declare the excellence of its Creator, the first to recognize His glory, to cleave to His truth, and to bow down in adoration before Him’ (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 159). Human development is seen as both qualitative and quantitative, characterized by several stages and similar to the growth of a seed growing into a tree or an embryo turning into a human being. Human development depends on nature, nurture and a spiritual innate character, a capacity that God has created in our soul. The human entity that goes through development is the soul and specifically the soul’s capacities of knowing, loving and willing. Professor Diessner’s revolutionizing reinterpretation of developmental psychology broadens the views of modern psychologists to comprehend also the spiritual aspect of human beings, the image of God enshrined at the heart of their reality, their soul. It thus brings them back to the etymological meaning of the name of their discipline.

The fourth chapter, ‘Western and Middle Eastern Developmental Stage Theories’, written in cooperation with Mina Yazdani of BIHE and Tim Richel of the University of Washington, Seattle, describes a classic seven-stage sequence of the development of the soul (psyche, Arabic *nafs*), as described by psychologically-oriented Islamic philosophers and the Bahá’í leader ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in the light of Jean

Piaget's genetic epistemology (cognitive development) and Erik Erikson's neo-psychoanalytical theory of psychosocial development. This description adopts Aristotle's framework for understanding, based on the four causes: the material cause, the efficient cause, the formal cause and the final cause. This apparently odd comparison is justified on the ground that the religious psychology of Islamic Sufism 'is making major incursions into the western press and psychological thought' and that 'a large percentage' of the adherents of the Bahá'í Faith 'live in the West', and 'Bahá'í-inspired psychological works are now being published there'. The main purpose of this paper is 'to provide a bridge for western educated developmental psychologists to understand fundamental aspects of the "developmental" world view of many middle easterners'. The paper concludes that 'the most engaging similarity among these theories is that they all regard the human psyche as a dynamic entity developing throughout the lifespan and moving towards human perfection – a view that induces hope and brings meaning to the human adventure'.

The fifth chapter, 'Selflessness: Congruencies between the Cognitive-Developmental: Research Programme and the Bahá'í Writings,' reexamines cognitive-developmentalism in the light of the primary authors of the writings of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, with the aim of charting 'an avenue of communication for psychologists with members of a "post-modern" religion over topics of mutual interest'. These topics of mutual interest comprise: 1) 'explicating the individual's personal evolution of thought', seen as 'change *for the better*', 2) describing development 'as stage-like', and 'simultaneously quantitative and qualitative, continuous and discontinuous, linear and circular', 3) the importance of knowing and knowledge in human development, seen as the natural emergence of a conscious knowledge, a conscious feeling capacity and a conscious will, 4) the central position of selflessness, not just intended as simple altruism, but seen as 'shedding an earlier stage of cognition in human development, which results in spiritual growth'.

The sixth chapter, 'Differentiating Spiritual Principles from Kohlbergian Moral Principles: A Bahá'í Interpretation', draws a comparison between Kohlbergian moral principles and Bahá'í spiritual principles, that is, fundamental and/or desirable concepts, or axioms, that are pervasive and eternal, purified from temporal or material interests and in accord with God's will. Both Kohlbergian moral principles and Bahá'í spiritual principles are seen as fundamental, universal and normative. Their difference in the ontological, teleological and cosmological perspectives

are explained. In the ontological perspective, whereas Bahá'í literature maintains that spiritual principles are congruent with the nature of the soul, Kohlberg did not even posit the existence of the soul. In the teleological perspective, Bahá'í spiritual principles 'encompass, and go beyond . . . "formalist" Kohlbergian moral principles'. The Bahá'í literature describes unity in diversity as the most important spiritual principle of this era, a principle that 'integrates separation and connection, both individuation and bonding, both detachment and attachment, both justice and mercy'. Professor Diessner explains that Bahá'í morality specifies what is right and leads human beings to what is both the goal of their lives and their good, a real 'dialectic between inherent rightness (deontological) and ultimate aims (teleological)'. In the cosmological perspective, according to Kohlberg, ethics is determined by the order inherent in the cosmos; in a Bahá'í perspective morality and rationality have both been created by God and thus our minds are such as to recognize right and wrong as they have been created by God and revealed by scripture. This paper points out that human beings will attain their highest good through conforming themselves to spiritual principles that are part of the universal cosmos and thus of their reality itself. We may easily deduce that any psychologist that encourages a patient to behave against these principles will draw her away from both her highest good and real happiness.

The seventh chapter, 'Beauty and Moral Education (with a Chinese Flavour)', is a ground-breaking paper. There are very few, if any, works dealing with this issue. Perhaps the well-known fact that most Nazi torture-mongers were highly sensitive to the beauty of art and music yet perpetrated such evil actions has dissuaded researchers from exploring this subject. The beauty described by Professor Diessner is not any beauty but a specific kind that is defined as moral beauty. The author does not pretend to define morality but describes it as something that has to do with 'voluntarily *willing* the good and the right . . . ; producing moral *emotions* . . . that motivate us towards the good and the right; *thinking* about and intellectually determining what is good and right . . . ; and *doing* what is good and right'. And thus he defines moral education as 'the process of teaching and learning in regard to 1) knowing the good, 2) experiencing moral emotions to motivate us towards the good and 3) choosing to will the good'. As to beauty, two threads of the western philosophic notion of beauty are examined: unity-in-diversity and disinterestedness. As to unity-in-diversity, the idea is emphasized that for a given thing to be beautiful, a superior harmony

among its component parts is required. As to disinterestedness, it is here intended as selflessness. As Professor Diessner writes, ‘it implies one must give up one’s will to the will of heaven to truly see the beauty in any and all things.’ Experiencing beauty promotes moral development, because a person capable of recognizing and appreciate beauty in the natural world and in the art more easily recognizes and appreciates moral beauty in the human social world. Such a person is more likely to experience the moral emotion of ‘elevation’, an emotion characterized by a desire of becoming a better person and accompanied by the feeling that one’s heart has been warmed up and dilated. Although there is no empirical research evidence for the thesis rationally explored and defended by this paper, teachers are encouraged to put it into practice in their classrooms so that they themselves may check the results.

The eighth chapter, ‘The Psychology of Beauty as a Foundation for Moral Education’ is written in a different style from the others. For example, the author himself warns the reader to consider his long quotations as an important part of his paper. It is also quite longer than the other chapters. It may be considered as the central chapter of the whole book. It reveals a greater effort to create bridges between the modern scientific attainments and the Bahá’í writings, in which beauty occupies a prominent place. The first thesis defended in this chapter is that the apex of human life is the recognition of the Manifestation of God for the age, the highest personification of beauty in the human world. The second thesis is that a ‘seeing eye’ is necessary to recognize the Manifestation of God. Then the author explains the meaning of the locution ‘seeing eye’, that a ‘seeing eye’ may be acquired through prayer and meditation, as well as through developing spiritual virtues. He suggests practical methods to develop virtues, such as ‘service’, ‘steadfastness in the covenant’, ‘teaching.’ Then Professor Diessner refers to concepts he dealt with at length in the preceding article, ‘Beauty and Moral Education (with a Chinese Flavour).’ He explains the meaning of the higher self, the importance of its respect and the development of its potential qualities. He describes the spiritual emotion of elevation and mentions its importance for the moral development of the individual. After an interesting ‘Slightly Tangential Foray into Words of Beauty: *Bahá*, *Jamál* and ‘*Alí*’, he points to the ‘Ubiquity of Beauty: Natural, Artistic, Moral and Spiritual Beauty’ and concludes his paper with a brief but significant excursion into the large issue of ‘Beauty and Love’.

The ninth chapter, ‘Differentiating Physical, Social and Spiritual Aspects of Emotions’, suggests that human reality is threefold: physical, human/social and divine. Therefore emotions can also be seen in their physical, human/social and divine aspects. A physical emotion is strictly related to the body, for example pleasure, which is the physical aspect of happiness. A human/social emotion is related to human interaction, as for example the social happiness deriving from giving and/or receiving affection. A spiritual emotion is not dependent on the body, although it can influence it; it transcends time and is always intrinsically good, for example the joy experienced and described by the great mystics as characterizing their so-called mystical experiences. It is suggested that all the five ‘classic’ emotions of the research literature (happiness, sadness, fear, disgust and anger), in their physical, human/social and divine aspects, are generated by love, the mother of all emotions. Happiness is the result of our experiencing unity with an object of our love; sadness arises whenever we are separated from an object of our love; fear depends on experiencing a threat of loss of an object of love; disgust is perceived when an object of our love is threatened with or affected by contamination; anger overcomes a person confronted with an unavoidable threat of loss of an object of love. We may deduce that if the loving power of the soul is the mother of all emotions, we may become better individuals – that is, individuals endowed with a greater capacity for promoting the constructive condition of unity-in-diversity among our fellow-beings – if we are able to achieve a deeper awareness of the capacities of our spiritual reality and, most of all, if we are able to translate those capacities into a unifying action.

The tenth chapter, ‘The Psychology of Materialism and Moral Development: Overcoming the Root Cause of Racism and Nationalism’, thoroughly studies the concept of materialism as a negative value rampant in the modern western world, characterized by ‘the excessive desire for material objects, an unwarranted lust for physical pleasures and comforts, the “everyday” form of prioritizing things over people, the prioritizing of concrete events over spirit.’ It defends the thesis that moral development implies for human beings to move away from materialism, the root cause of racism, nationalism and sexism, and to move nearer to God. Moving nearer to God is interpreted as abandoning imitation, acquiring the ability of an independent investigation of truth and of ‘deciding between what are one’s “needs” versus what are “excess” possessions in one’s life,’ and most of all being ready to help others, in the name of God.

The eleventh chapter, 'The Myth of Psyche and Eros: An Interpretation Based on Correlates in the Bahá'í writings,' confirms the idea that psychological and spiritual transformation is realized through, the eternal union of the soul with love, through an interpretation of the ancient myth of Psyche and Eros in the light of the Bahá'í writings.

The last chapter is highly significant as the epitome of the whole book. The soul is the protagonist of this book. Her nature is examined; a good method to study her development is explored; possible stages of her development are exposed in eastern and western perspectives; the importance of selflessness as detachment from lower degrees of developments for her growth is emphasized; her exposure to moral beauty is recommended in that it evokes the moral emotion of elevation, conducive in its turn to moral action; the threefold – physical, human/social and divine – nature of her emotions is explored; love is recognized as the mother of all emotions; the evil influence exercised by materialistic attitudes on the soul is denounced; the myth of Psyche and Eros is illustrated, as the beautiful story of the desirable marriage of our soul with the highest Good.

The book, which lays such an emphasis on the importance of beauty, for the development of the soul, is characterized by a lucid style, very far from the imaginary words we are accustomed to associate with art. This book is, on the contrary, noteworthy for its stringent logic and the clearness of its arguments. If it is true that beauty takes on many different aspects, the most evident beauty of this book is the love of harmonious logic, scientific truth and spiritual reality it inspires.

References

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