

## Science and Religion: Are They Complimentary or in Conflict?

Graham Nicholson 

*“Much of the difficulty in applying science to development today has come from the failure to link science to the basic spiritual and moral values upon which each society is built”<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Statement by the Baha’i International Community to the United Nations Conference on Science and Technology for Development, Vienna, 20-31 August 1979.

**Abstract:** Science and religion are seen by many as being in opposition such that they cannot be reconciled. The modern rise of science and scientific materialism have been accompanied by a decline in religious belief, particularly in the West. Religious believers, especially those in religious orders, have always had a tendency to descend into dogmatism in the assertion of what they perceive to be absolute spiritual truth. This was most severely challenged by the rise of science in the Renaissance. This led to the development of a healthy skepticism about many religious claims, especially as religion had at that time descended to a considerable degree into states of corruption, self-interest, literalism and superstition, at odds with the original teachings of the founder. This approach was further advanced by the Darwinian theories of evolution, in opposition to the ‘once only’ view of Divine creation. But the debate has since moved on to a developing, new understanding of the relationship between science and religion, as illustrated in the Baha’i teachings.

### Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to argue for a new understanding of the relationship between science and religion, on the basis that the both have an essential role to play in human society and can be reconciled. It is not my purpose to argue for the superiority of any one religion over another, nor for the existence of a particular kind of God or other deity. For present purposes it does not matter if the reader is a believer in some religion, a skeptic, an agnostic, or an atheist with no religion. However for present purposes I do postulate the existence of a spiritual reality, being that which exists beyond the purely physical<sup>1</sup>. The term “religion”, on the other hand, is not an easy term to define<sup>2</sup>, but it is used in

the present context in the sense of some organized system of spiritual belief to which a number of people profess their adherence. It may or may not involve belief in some supernatural being<sup>3</sup>, but it must involve belief in some spiritual concepts or entities, that is, concepts or entities the existence of which transcend any material form in this physical universe. This is not to say that the spiritual plays no part in this physical universe. It is simply to say that the physical and the spiritual differ in their essential essence. In one sense, each is the antonym of the other, although in another sense it is argued that they are both intimately connected and form one reality.

<sup>1</sup> Discussed further below.

<sup>2</sup> This difficulty was identified by Mason ACJ and Brennan J in *Church of the New Faith v Commissioner of Payroll Tax (Vic)* (1983) 154 CLR 120 at 131 - 6. They said that:

*“An understanding of these problems is furnished in part by the natural and behavioural sciences and by other humanistic disciplines. Many philosophies, however, go beyond the fields of their disciplines and seek to explain, in terms of broader reality, the existence of the universe, the meaning of human life, and human destiny. For some, the natural order, known or knowable by use of man’s senses and his natural reason, provides a sufficient and exhaustive solution to these great problems; for others an adequate*

*solution can be found only in the supernatural order, in which man may believe as a matter of faith, but which he cannot know by his senses and the reality of which he cannot demonstrate to others who do not share his faith. ”*

They concluded at p 136 that for the purposes of section 116 of the Australian Constitution and law that:

*“the criteria of religion are twofold: first, belief in a supernatural Being, Thing or Principle; and second, the acceptance of canons of conduct in order to give effect to that belief....”*

See also Wilson and Deane JJ at pp 174-5.

<sup>3</sup> Although most religious belief systems involve some belief in a supernatural being or beings.

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### The Nature of the Spiritual

For some, accustomed to our very materialistic ways of modern thinking, it can be difficult to comprehend the nature of the spiritual. Some even question the existence of the spiritual realm. They may assert that nothing exists beyond the matter and energy that comprises the physical universe and which is discoverable by science. Obviously I do not agree with this somewhat dogmatic assertion. So let me illustrate the concept of the spiritual by reference to the words of one distinguished commentator. Polkinghorne refers to what he says is the poverty of the objectivistic (or scientific) account:

*“...When we consider the mystery of music. From a scientific point of view, it is nothing but vibrations in the air, impinging on the eardrums and stimulating neural currents in the brain. How does it come about that this banal sequence of temporal activity has the power to speak to our hearts of an eternal beauty? The whole range of subjective experience, from perceiving a patch of pink, to being enthralled by a performance of the Mass in B Minor, and on the mystic’s encounter with the ineffable reality of the One, all these truly human experiences are at the centre of our encounter with reality and are not to be dismissed as epiphenomenal froth on the surface of a universe whose true nature is impersonal and lifeless”<sup>4</sup>.*

Thus sound has both a scientific basis as well as a non-material quality or attribute. When forming part of a great musical masterpiece of great spiritual elevation, it can ignite the soul and result in profound spiritual feelings, enhancing spiritual belief. This quality or attribute, although operating through the physical mechanisms of sound, speaks of an existence essentially beyond the physical realm. It is an example of what I mean by the spiritual.

Let me give another illustration. It is now commonly accepted that the indigenous peoples of the Australian Continent, the Aboriginals, had, at the time of European settlement, and still have in many cases, a profound and complex system of spiritual beliefs. This includes a form of close spiritual connection with their customary lands. This was and is a mystical and sacred form of belief, represented by creation stories, ancestral beings, totems, ceremonies, sacred sites and in others ways. It is clearly a form of belief that encompasses, but also has an existence that extends beyond, this physical world. We generally have no difficulty recognising

this indigenous belief system as being “spiritual” in nature. It follows that we should not be put off when asked to accept that the spiritual realm exists and is experienced by those within the belief systems of other sections of humanity, including that of our own society.

Ultimately any religious belief is an internal matter rather than something that can be measured objectively by science. It is experiential in nature, and can only be explained to others by the expression of emotions and other experiential descriptions, often using metaphor or analogy. The overwhelming nature of many spiritual experiences, often accompanied by a deep form of awakening and understanding, plus the occurrence of surprising synchronicities and a range of other confirmations of belief, puts it out the range of science and makes it difficult for others to really comprehend.

Recognition in a particular case that another person has a spiritual belief, of course, does not necessarily involve self-identification with and acceptance of that belief. In a free and open society, one is free to accept or reject the truth of any spiritual belief, just as one is free to accept or reject the truth of any scientific principle that may be propounded. But modern notions of human rights, as well as the basic rules of decency in a pluralistic society, demand respect for that other person's belief.

### Methodology

Let us approach this difference between science and religion in another way by contrasting the methodology of these approaches. Science begins with the observation and measurement of particular physical facts, using the human senses. By observing results and patterns on a number of occasions, a general rule is postulated as a working hypothesis. Subsequent observations and experiments will either confirm that hypothesis or lead to the postulation of a new one. The methodology moves from the particular to the general. The scientific truth gradually emerges<sup>5</sup>.

Religion and spiritual belief, on the other hand, move in the opposite direction. They generally start from general principles and values, usually recorded in a book or books, which then need to be applied to particular facts<sup>6</sup>. In times of old, people were taught to just accept the truth of their professed beliefs without question, whether verifiable by science or otherwise. If anyone asserted that the beliefs differed

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<sup>4</sup> John Polkinghorne, “Belief in God in an Age of Science”, (1998, Yale UP), 18-19. The Buddha said “It is not in the body of the lute that one finds the true abode of music”, and the great Toscanini said “Play not with your instruments but with your heart”, see Guy Murchie, “The Seven Mysteries of Life”, (1978, Houghton Mifflin), 643.

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<sup>5</sup> William S Hatcher, “Minimalism”, (2002, Books for the World), 12-13.

<sup>6</sup> Spiritual feelings and beliefs can also stem just from inner experiences, apparently unrelated to any religious teachings. But these tend to be vague, ethereal and individualistic in nature compared to the great religions.

from scientific principle or were illogical, the person was treated as a heretic<sup>7</sup>. In modern times, under the influence of science and reason, there is a much greater tendency in the West to question certain spiritual beliefs. Many older beliefs have had to be discarded under the threat of being relegated to mere superstition or mythology. Alternatively, the literal approach to spiritual teachings has increasingly come under attack by some liberal theologians, academics and others, sometimes forcing a recognition by believers that the teachings may be intended to be metaphorical in nature rather than literally true<sup>8</sup>.

The spiritual approach gives rise to a number of difficulties for the skeptic, not the least of which is the matter of authenticity. Many religious teachings are of ancient origin, there is not always agreement on the sacred texts, and of course there are many divisions of interpretation and belief within particular religions. The adoption of any particular belief can be a challenge, particularly if it is approached with any degree of exclusivity. Some particular beliefs may appear to be “foreign”, or offensive, or excessive, or obscure, or simply irrational and unbelievable, but any such judgment is likely to be influenced, in part at least, by the background and perspective of the person making the judgment. A broader and more open-minded vision may be beneficial in this process, but there is a danger in the context of great religious plurality that this may lead in the direction of baseless or syncretic beliefs or personal interpretations derived from self-centred or improper motives. A full measure of independent personal investigation seems most desirable in any spiritual search<sup>9</sup>.

### **Baha’i Approach**

The Baha’i approach to this is interesting. The emphasis is placed on the original founder of each of the great religions, the spiritual purity and selfless nature of that founder’s life and the elevated nature of the teachings of that founder<sup>10</sup>, and not on subsequent interpretations by others of that founder’s life and teachings. This approach is based on the principle that the founder is a “Manifestation” of the divine on earth, with authority to propound divine principles and values for the spiritual education of humanity. The founder inaugurates a new spiritual cycle on earth, a new religion, framed to meet the requirements of contemporary time and place whilst restating eternal spiritual fundamentals. The founder suffers greatly for these teachings, but the faith so

established triumphs over adversity and flourishes. Within the Baha’i Faith, the greatest care is taken to ensure the authenticity and accuracy of the Writings of the Founder of the Baha’i Faith, Baha’u’llah<sup>11</sup>, and of any translations of those Writings into other languages. No Baha’i is entitled to push his or her understanding of those Writings onto anyone else, and there is no clergy.

Again, for present purposes it is not necessary for the reader to accept the truth of any such spiritual principles and values as so taught in any particular belief system, nor for the reader to adopt same<sup>12</sup>. It is simply a matter of accepting that this methodology does give rise to many, many spiritual belief systems which are accepted as being binding by their adherents. One does not have to accept the validity of a particular spiritual belief in order to accept that there are spiritual forces at work in the universe (and beyond). And in any event, many adherents of various beliefs would accept that they are on a journey of spiritual discovery in their lives, one in which the spiritual truth only emerges gradually and by degrees as a result of a developing understanding and maturity. It is one thing, for example, to adopt the principle of “love thy neighbour”; it is quite another to fully understand what it means, how it interacts with other spiritual principles, and how it should be applied in practice from day to day.

In this sense, even though spiritual principles and values are often asserted in absolute terms, when viewed from the perspective and understanding of the average human being, they have a relative nature not unlike that of scientific principles<sup>13</sup>. The truth exists, it is necessarily one truth, but the methodologies of both science and religion involve an ongoing search for that truth.

### **Rise of Science**

It is of course not hard to identify some of the main reasons why the modern rise of science has been accompanied by a decline in religious belief, particularly in the West. Religious believers, especially those in religious orders, have always had a tendency to descend into dogmatism in the assertion of what they perceive to be absolute spiritual truth. This was most severely challenged by the rise of science in the Renaissance. The well known case of the persecution of Galileo for the expression of his scientific views is a good example, but there were

<sup>7</sup> As was the case with Galileo, see Bertrand Russell, “Religion and Science,” (1961, OUP), Chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> The metaphorical or allegorical nature of many religious teachings, using the material world to explain the spiritual, has been asserted from ancient times. Thus the Islamic Quran of Muhammad makes this very clear in Surahs 3:7, 24:35.

<sup>9</sup> In fact a basic Baha’i principle.

<sup>10</sup> Such as Jesus Christ, Muhammad, Krishna, etc.

<sup>11</sup> (1817-1892), the name meaning “Glory of God”.

<sup>12</sup> Although there is a growing recognition that all the great religions in substance share many common values – for example, the golden rule of do unto others as you would do to yourself.

<sup>13</sup> Dawkins asserts that there are absolute scientific truths which we can understand, just as some religionists assert that there are certain absolute religious truths which any person is capable of comprehending.

many other examples<sup>14</sup>. This led in the Reformation to the development of a healthy skepticism about many religious claims, especially as religion had at that time descended to a considerable degree into states of corruption, self-interest, literalism and superstition, at odds with the original teachings of the founder.

This process of the decline of religion was accelerated with the publication of scientific views on the theory of evolution and natural selection in the nineteenth century by Darwin and others<sup>15</sup>. In many quarters, these views were seen as a challenge to the validity of Biblical theistic views on what was commonly regarded to be the once-only divine creation of the universe<sup>16</sup>. From an early date these two views were seen as being in opposition to one another, and it led to bitter and prolonged debate. The debate continued as science and technology rapidly advanced and increasingly exerted a sweeping influence on modern society. There was a widespread formation of a new and more materialistic/scientific world view to replace the older religious one. White called it an:

*“...atmosphere of thought engendered by the development of all sciences during the last three centuries. Vast masses of myth, legend, marvel, and dogmatic assertion, coming into this atmosphere, have been dissolved and are now dissolving quietly away like icebergs drifted into the Gulf Stream”*<sup>17</sup>.

In particular, the theory of evolution received wide, general acceptance by many people<sup>18</sup>. Old theological prejudices still remain in some quarters in denial of scientific advances. But generally the field of organised religion has been in prolonged retreat as science has advanced and scientific theories have been able to be substantiated to the satisfaction of the general populace. The resultant loss of credibility has been very damaging for organized religion. It has resulted in widespread questioning of the value of organized religion and an accompanying decline in active religious membership in the West. Many people have ceased to have any adherence to any particular religion, whether or not they have spiritual views of their own.

What is to be made of this decline? Is there nothing more to the universe than matter and energy located in space/time, and governed by empirically discoverable scientific laws? Are we to regard the

marvel of material existence as merely being some form of automaton that has gradually evolved in accordance with those laws since the apparent beginning of the universe, often through the most narrow of contingencies? Some philosophers and scientists have thought so<sup>19</sup>. Thus Bertrand Russell asserted the triumph of science and the free scientific pursuit of knowledge over religion, although he was willing to accept that religion had some value in its ethical doctrines<sup>20</sup>. Some modern scientists, such as Hawking, have gone further and argued that science has made religion superfluous<sup>21</sup>.

But their views were not new. Philosophers and others prior to the 20th century were already leaning towards a similar conclusion. Belief in a spiritual realm was challenged by the rise of the empirical philosophers such as Locke. Hawking's views are said to reflect those of the philosopher Hume several hundred years earlier, who assumed that the universe just sprang into existence without any cause<sup>22</sup>. This was carried further by the challenges to organised religion in the French Revolution and in writings such as those of Voltaire. The emergence of the philosophy of humanistic utilitarianism, such as with Bentham, posed its own challenges to religious belief. New philosophers such as Nietzsche preached in the name of human freedom that God was dead, and Comte declared that positivistic and empirically based science had supplanted what he saw to be religious mythology<sup>23</sup>. Annie Besant, who for a while was an atheist, wrote that she knew nothing about God and therefore did not believe in him or it<sup>24</sup>. She later changed her views to become a leader of Theosophy. Marx declared that religion was the opium of the people<sup>25</sup>. Many other prominent commentators expressed similar views, the compound result of which was to greatly influence public thinking in the West.

This was further compounded by the mass destruction, death and misery in the Great War, followed closely by more of the same in the Second World War and by a sequence of more localized conflicts ever since. Barbarism has descended on many quarters of the world, often perpetrated in the name of religion but in reality a perversion of religion. People have had cause to question the sense of it all. It seems to confirm, on the surface at least, the concept of survival of the fittest, operating at the

<sup>14</sup> Andrew D White, "A History of the Warfare of Science with Religion", (1960, Dover Publication Edition).

<sup>15</sup> Bertrand Russell, op. cit., Chapter 3.

<sup>16</sup> Old Testament, Book of Genesis.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew D White, op.cit., 393.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Ruse, "Can a Darwinian be a Christian?", (2001, Cambridge UP), 25.

<sup>19</sup> A foremost proponent of this view is Richard Dawkins. See his latest publication, "A Devil's Chaplain", (2004, Phoenix).

<sup>20</sup> Bertrand Russell, op. cit., 247; see also "Why I am not a Christian", (1927).

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Hawking, "A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes", (1988, Bantam).

<sup>22</sup> William S Hatcher, op. cit., 109.

<sup>23</sup> In later life, Comte became involved in mysticism.

<sup>24</sup> Besant, "Gospel of Atheism", (1877).

<sup>25</sup> Marx, "Collected Works", Vol III, 175.



human level. Modern science has given a new, massively destructive effect to conflict and has broadened its scope and intensity. Protagonists in such conflicts have, concurrently from both sides, often sought justification for their position in their religious allegiances, to the dismay of others. Few have as yet come to the realization that a primary cause for the increased intensity of conflict has been what I describe as the imbalance between science and religion, where religion, if relied on at all, is distorted for non-spiritual purposes.

The existence of atheistic views, in a materialistic age, is not entirely surprising. If the emphasis of thought and meaning is firmly placed on that which can be objectively perceived by the senses and can be acquired, the importance of the spiritual realm in human life will naturally retreat. But the materialistic/positivist approach to existence is equivalent to saying that if something can't be discovered by scientific methodologies using the human senses, then it does not exist. It is a view that affirms the pre-eminence of the human senses in the determination of what exists, that humanity in this sense is the measure of all things. These materialistic views have had a deep and as yet not fully understood effect on the thinking of the masses in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>26</sup>. Thus it has become commonplace for people without any religion to ascribe materialistic/positivist explanations to many facets of human existence and experience. To many, religion is a human social invention, which had its roots in primitive times in an effort to explain and give meaning to life and death, and which has gradually evolved by human intervention into contemporary forms of monotheism, new age beliefs and other contemporary belief systems<sup>27</sup>. Phillip Adams, a professed atheist, said that human beings are driven by a variety of fears, the greatest of which is the fear of death, leading to a desperate desire for eternal life. This in turn, he says, has piled up the pyramids and created our cathedrals<sup>28</sup>.

### Evolution

Darwin himself, to whom much of this debate about religion and science is ascribed, did not use the theory of evolution to promote atheism and materialism— quite the contrary. He recognised the role and permissible bounds of science, including that it could not resolve, or even specify, the existence or character of God, the ultimate meaning of life, the

proper foundations of morality, or any other spiritual question. He never argued that the fact of evolution necessarily implied the non-existence of a deity or spiritual forces<sup>29</sup>. We have to ask ourselves whether we have greatly misconstrued his views in the rush to adopt materialistic explanations for all things. In the need to dispense with a literal view of certain old religious teachings that are no longer reasonably supportable, such as an anthropomorphic concept of the deity, have we “*thrown the baby out with the bathwater*”?

In more contemporary times, as the wonders of the universe have been more and more exposed by science, and the incredible beauty, complexity and interrelationship of all parts of the universe realized, from the macro to the micro levels, some prominent scientists have begun to express their views in a manner more accommodating to the spiritual realm. The scientific evidence points fairly conclusively to a universe of grand integrated design, rather than a haphazard universe without any meaning or direction other than as provided by objective scientific laws. It is hard to simply describe it as something that just is, without reflecting on its deeper significance. The great man Einstein himself recognised that there must be more to the universe than just objective scientific laws, and that physical existence disclosed a mystery, indicating some greater spiritual power or intelligence at work<sup>30</sup>. He emphasized the dangers of allowing science to run free without appropriate moral restraints in the interests of all humanity, stating:

*"Religion without science is blind. Science without religion is lame"*<sup>31</sup>.

Other scientists are now more prepared to speak out in support of the reality of a spiritual realm<sup>32</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps much more so that the post-modern subjective philosophy of more recent origins.

<sup>27</sup> See *Church of the New Faith v Commissioner of Payroll Tax (Vic)*, op. cit., per Murphy J at 151 - 152.

<sup>28</sup> *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, September 11-12 2004, 42: see also Phillip Adams, “*Adams versus God*”, (1985, Nelson). One might compare the modern form of architectural aggrandisement in the tall city towers of commerce and industry, symbols of the excesses of materialism.

<sup>29</sup> Stephen Jay Gould, “*Rock of Ages*”, (1999, Ballantine Books), 192. However Darwin was not without his religious doubts as a result of his research – see Stephen Jay Gould, “*Leonardo's Mountain of Clams and the Diet of Worms*”, (1998, Jonathan Cape), 296-7. Darwin went on to say that he was not content to view this wonderful universe, and especially the nature of man, and to conclude that everything was the result of brute force. Rather, he was inclined to look at everything as resulting from designed laws - see K Brown (Ed.), “*Evolution & Baha'i Belief*”, (2001, Kalimat Press), 12.

<sup>30</sup> A Einstein, “*Albert Einstein: The Human Side*”, (1979, Princeton UP, H Dukas and B Hoffman Eds.).

<sup>31</sup> A Einstein, “*Ideas and Opinions*”, (1973, Souvenir Press), 46.

<sup>32</sup> There are many examples in 20<sup>th</sup> century literature of scientists and others expressing views supportive of the spiritual in some way. They may not in some cases believe in a personal deity, but they generally accept the existence of a spiritual or mystical realm beyond the physical. See, for example, C G Jung, “*Psychology and Religion*”, (1938, Yale UP); Stephen J Gould, op. cit.; Fritjof Capra, “*The Tao of Physics*”, (1999, Shambhala); J Polkinghorne, op. cit.; see also Guy Murchie, op. cit.; Gerald L Schroeder, “*The Hidden Face of God*”, (2001, Free Press); Keith Ward, “*God, Chance and Necessity*”, (1996, One World); K Wilber, “*The Marriage of Sense and Soul*”, (1999, Broadway Books). Paul

Largely gone now are the empty arguments that saw an antipathy between notions of creation and evolution<sup>33</sup>. And many scientists have managed to maintain their religious beliefs notwithstanding the onslaught posed by the increase in atheistic and agnostic beliefs. Those scientists, along with many other people, have presumably been influenced by the amazing mathematical order and symmetry that exists in the universe that cannot be adequately explained by science. This high level of order requires enormous inputs and forces marshaled in a very particular way to create and maintain each distinct entity within that order, sufficient to counteract the tendency in all things towards disorder, or entropy. Science can explain what exists in the universe and the physical forces that lead to its existence, but not the bigger question of why and how it came to exist in this particular form. Moreover science cannot adequately explain how this has given rise to the highest form of life in homo sapiens, each human having a present-tense consciousness of their existence and place within the immensity of the material universe in the immensity of time<sup>34</sup>. There seems to be more to existence than just a set of objective scientific laws interacting to achieve this result. As Dr Farzam Arbab, a scientist and Baha'i, recently put it, it is a fallacy to say that

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Davies was originally opposed to the existence of a God or the spiritual – see “*God and the New Physics*”, (1983, Penguin), but in more recent writings he has explored the likelihood of a God and accepted the inadequacies of science to deal with ethical and social issues – see “*The Mind of God: Science and the Search for Ultimate Meaning*”, (1992, Simon and Schuster); see also Bruce Yabsley, “*The New Physics: What has God got to do with it?*”, [http://www.sift.org.au/97sepby/bruce\\_sift.html](http://www.sift.org.au/97sepby/bruce_sift.html).

<sup>33</sup> This is a subject for another paper, but fewer people now believe that God actually created the world in a once-only divine act, with all the world's current life and features, in the time taken for six complete rotations of the earth on its axis; that is, the literal interpretation of the Book of Genesis. Increasingly, a theistic view of an ongoing dynamic creation in accordance with the laws of nature, evolving through great periods of time, is emerging and is quite compatible with a scientific, evolutionary approach. The Baha'i Writings support the view that creation is an ongoing process, and teach that in evolution there is support for the existence of God, rather than the denial of God. For a Baha'i view on evolution, see A L Dahl, “*Unless and Until*”, (1990, Baha'i Publishing Trust), Chapter 1; K Brown, op. cit.

<sup>34</sup> Materialists may argue that homo sapiens is just another species of animal, one that has accidentally come to dominate the planet. Religionists, including Baha'is, would mostly disagree and argue that it was by divine design that humans have acquired unique faculties and abilities, beyond those common with the animals. These include the capacity to know and to worship God and to carry forward an advancing civilisation. Interestingly, anti-religionist Dawkins also agrees that humans have certain unique features-see footnote 41 below. Baha'u'llah stated :

*"Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him - a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation."*

(Gleanings, 1983, Baha'i Publishing Trust),

85.

only that which is measurable is true - on the contrary, everything has an inner essence which cannot be comprehended by the five human senses. Science necessarily describes only a fragment of reality, which is of enormous value, but it cannot possibly correspond to reality as it is.<sup>35</sup>

Believers, of whatever particular religious persuasion, are no doubt also influenced by their own experiences of the spiritual, experiences which are frequently profound and not explainable simply by reference to scientific laws alone. As Capra puts it-

*"Mystical knowledge can never be obtained just by observation, but only by full participation with one's own being"*<sup>36</sup>.

And at the moral level, people are becoming aware of the indispensable role of religion<sup>37</sup> in prescribing standards of conduct that believers accept as binding on them. There may be areas of disagreement between different religionists in relation to particular moral issues, but it is possible to discern broad patterns of agreement between the original moral teachings of the great religions – a global ethic<sup>38</sup>. However the rise of science over religion has been accompanied by a loss of interest in, and a decline in the application of, moral standards in many peoples' lives. No secular moral views have ever commanded a similar influence to that of religion. The present moral decline is evident in the many acute problems now being experienced in Western society, in the violence, prejudice, abuse, corruption, self-centredness, inequity, waste, etc. Science has provided many wonderful advances to humanity, but it has also brought untold suffering such as in the use of modern destructive weapons in war. And the emergence of weapons of mass destruction poses a special threat to humanity's future. Science without

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<sup>35</sup> Talk at St Joseph's College, Sydney, 3 October 2004. The same talk was delivered to a conference in Perth just afterwards. In the printed version, Dr Arbab quotes from Abdu'l-Baha:

*"...the inner essence of anything is not comprehended, but only its qualities. For example, the inner essence of the sun is unknown, but is understood by its qualities, which are heat and light. The inner essence of man is unknown and not evident, but by its qualities it is characterized and known. Thus everything is known by its qualities and not by its essence."*

<sup>36</sup> Capra, op. cit., 141.

<sup>37</sup> This does not include the many contemporary movements and beliefs that parade under the name of religion but which are in fact a man-made distortion of religion that lead to hatred, violence, terrorism and disunity.

<sup>38</sup> Such a global ethic was subscribed to by the majority of participants from different religions at the World Parliament of Religions, 1993, Chicago; see “*A Global Ethic*”, with commentaries by Hans Kung and Karl-Josef Kuschel. (1993, Continuum). The recital to the Global Ethic states –

*"We affirm that a common set of core values is found in the teachings of the religions, and that these form the basis of a global ethic"*.

morality is a serious form of imbalance which threatens us all.

### Towards Reconciliation

Some commentators now perceive a growing convergence between science and religion. On this view, while each of them occupy a different space<sup>39</sup>, they are seen as being more complimentary rather than in conflict. Of course this is not a view accepted by the scientific positivists<sup>40</sup>.

As a Baha'i, the teachings of the founder of that Faith, Baha'u'llah, provide a particular viewpoint on the relationship between science and religion. The two are regarded as completely compatible, like two sides of the one coin. The son of the Founder, Abdu'l-Baha, stated-

*"...true science is reason and reality, and religion is essential reality and pure reason ; therefore the two must correspond. Religious teaching which is at variance with science and reason is human intervention and imagination unworthy of acceptance, for the antithesis and opposite of knowledge is superstition born of the ignorance of man. If we say that religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test"*<sup>41</sup>.

Put another way, Abdu'l-Baha said-

*"We may think of science as one wing and religion as the other; a bird needs two wings for flight, one alone would be useless. Any religion that contradicts science, or that is opposed to it, is only ignorance – for ignorance is the opposite of knowledge."*<sup>42</sup>

The Baha'i Faith specifies four criteria of knowledge – sense perception, intellect and human reason (the rational faculty), insight (inspiration or intuition or vision) and scriptural authority in the sacred teachings of the founders of the great religions (divine revelation), but indicates that all four are limited in human hands. Excessive reliance on any one of them can lead to error. Reliable knowledge follows from the concurrent application of all four of these criteria, including science. Even the sacred writings of the founders of the great religions, taken alone, can lead to error through literalism and other errors of interpretation, especially if not read and

applied with a pure heart. The greatest obstacle in the search for true reality is said to be prejudice of various kinds, a matter of internal perspective. It includes the prejudice flowing from assertions by one person that his or her particular view is absolutely true and correct, and that everyone else is in error. There can only be one reality, and while human beings have been provided with the physical, intellectual and spiritual tools to search for that one reality, it is a lifelong search which requires humility, tolerance and respect for the views of others. That search for reality is the cause of the spiritual illumination and unification of humanity, leading it to ever higher stages of progress and attainment and international peace. Such a search is productive of the unity and oneness of humankind. It is not just a matter of acquiring materialistic knowledge for its own sake. Reality is seen as the bestowal of the one supreme God, however called, and includes the reality of the divine virtues and perfections leading to unity<sup>43</sup>. These virtues and perfections have now been restated by Baha'u'llah in a form appropriate to this contemporary global age.

The idea of unity and oneness is now one that is very much alive<sup>44</sup>. For a long time it was the domain of visionaries and spiritual teachers, but rarely scientists. In the past it was possible to say that scientific theories did not lead to reality, because they were segmented. In more recent times it has been argued that the concepts of unity and interdependence do have a basis in science. Thus the Second Report of the Club of Rome<sup>45</sup> presented the world as a single system – "that is, as a collection of mutually interacting and interdependent parts". It was said that this model was based on available data and understanding of the developmental processes in all relevant scientific disciplines. Some of the leading scientific commentators are now approaching the sciences on the basis that everything in the universe is held together by a dynamic wholeness or interconnectedness. It is a view perhaps best expressed in terms of "organic wholeness", or "unity

<sup>43</sup> For Baha'i views on the compatibility of science and religion, see A Khursheed, "Science and Religion: Towards a Restoration of an Ancient Harmony", (1987, One World); Elaine Lacroix-Hopson, "Creation, Evolution and Eternity: A Baha'i's Perspective on Religion and Science", (2001, Yachay Wasi Inc.).

<sup>44</sup> The concept of the oneness and wholeness of the earth and the universe has more recently been embraced by environmentalists. Thus we have the Gaia hypothesis, a term derived from the ancient Greeks – see James Lovelock, "The Ages of Gaia", (1988, Bantam Books); Stephen B Scharper, "The Gaia Hypothesis", in "Cross Currents", (Summer 1994), 207-221. Environmental science now studies whole ecosystems. There is widespread recognition that the major environmental problems of this age are global in reach, not limited by national boundaries, and that they need global solutions. This approach of oneness and wholeness is reflected in current international documents such as Agenda 21 of the Rio Earth Summit, 1992

<sup>45</sup> M Msarovic and E Pestel, "Mankind at the Turning Point", (1974, Reader's Digest Press), viii.

<sup>39</sup> Or as Capra puts it, a separate "magisterium", a term also found in the Pope's message on evolution of 1966.

<sup>40</sup> Eg: Dawkins describes it as a "sham" - see "A Devil's Chaplain", (2004, Phoenix), 179.

<sup>41</sup> Abdu'l-Baha, "The Promulgation of Universal Peace", (1982, Baha'i Publishing Trust), 107, 373-4.

<sup>42</sup> Paris Talks, (11<sup>th</sup> Ed., 1969, Baha'i Publishing Trust), 131-2.

of nature"<sup>46</sup>. Capra makes this point in drawing parallels between modern science and the mystical teachings of ancient eastern religions<sup>47</sup>, in that he talks of the essential unity of all things and events<sup>48</sup>. More than that, Capra says that the physicist has also learnt that he himself and his consciousness are an integral part of this unity. Thus he points out that the mystic and the physicist arrive at the same conclusion, one from the inner realm, and one from the outer physical world.<sup>49</sup> He refers to recent developments in the sciences that are beginning to take this spiritual aspect into account – in neuroscience, in psychology and in the social sciences<sup>50</sup>.

To quote from Kishan Manocha<sup>51</sup>, commenting on the work of Renee Weber<sup>52</sup> in pointing towards a harmony between the scientific and the spiritual –

*“Such insights should not come as a surprise to students of the Baha’i Revelation who not only acknowledge the fundamental oneness and unity operating in all spheres of existence, but readily appreciate and celebrate the unique contributions of science and mysticism/revelation in the search for unity. As we can expect the Baha’i teachings to continue to inspire, inform and transform present and future understanding of the unity paradigm, it makes it increasingly valuable, at this stage, to explore and identify ways in which the new theories of physical nature echo the insights contained within the Revelation of Baha’u’llah, thereby leading us to a more profound understanding that unity lies at the heart of our world.”*

This approach to oneness and wholeness is now being increasingly extended to the connection between the sciences on the one hand, and religion or the spiritual on the other. Thus the Earth Charter states that the earth is an interdependent community of life – all parts of the system are interconnected and essential to the functioning of the whole. It recites that the crisis we face today is a spiritual one, and that the religions have a special responsibility for the environment. Further, it says that a new spirit is being born and a new awareness of our place in the delicate balance. It calls for a transformation of our hearts and minds, concrete changes to our way of life, the renewal of

religions and the creation of a global society<sup>53</sup>. This approach is also reflected in a growing interest in the beliefs and wisdom of indigenous peoples, where spirit is treated as an inseparable part of all existence<sup>54</sup>. The followers of many older religions are being required by the fast-developing relationships between all parts of the globe to re-orientate their beliefs in a manner more conducive to global unity and peace.

To the Baha’i, the reconciliation of science and religion is a priority goal if world unity and peace are to be achieved. Religion and science are seen as the two most potent forces in human life for the acquisition and application of knowledge<sup>55</sup>, and the continuance of the view that they are in conflict is regarded as being prejudicial to the development of a peaceful world civilisation<sup>56</sup>. Both are ultimately sourced in the one supreme God<sup>57</sup>, they are complimentary, and constructive collaboration between them can only lead to unity and oneness. When science is freed from the fetters of the prevailing philosophy of dogmatic materialism, and its underlying unity with religion freed from the fetters of prejudice is realised, the Baha’i Faith teaches that a great force for good will be released into the world<sup>58</sup>. It is one of the great challenges now facing humanity.

Let Baha’u’llah have the last say<sup>59</sup>-

*“Every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading to His knowledge, a sign of His sovereignty, a revelation of His names, a token of His power, a means of admittance into His straight path”;*

and

*“All-praise to the unity of God, and all-honor to Him, the Sovereign Lord, the Incomparable, the All-glorious Ruler of the universe, Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation, and Who,*

<sup>53</sup> The Earth Charter, facilitated and sponsored by the Earth Council chaired by Maurice Strong and Green Cross International headed by Mikhail Gorbachev, and backed by a grant from the Netherlands Government.

<sup>54</sup> P Knudtson and D Suzuki, *“The Wisdom of the Elders”*, (1992, Allen and Unwin).

<sup>55</sup> A similar view is expressed by the Christian theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *“The Phenomenon of Man”*, (1965, Collins/Fontana Books), 312-3.

<sup>56</sup> Statement by Baha’i International Community, op. cit., 3.

<sup>57</sup> However called or described.

<sup>58</sup> Abdu'l-Baha stated:

*“When religion, shorn of its superstitions, traditions and unintelligent dogmas shows its conformity with science, then there will 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.” - see A Khurshed, op. cit., 51.*

<sup>59</sup> Baha’u’llah, *“Gleanings”*, op.cit., 160 and 64-5.

<sup>46</sup> K Brown (Ed.), op. cit., per Eberhard von Kitzing, at 247, citing writers such as Haeckel, Weizsacker and Dennett.

<sup>47</sup> Capra, op. cit., Epilogue.

<sup>48</sup> Hans Kung says that for all the methodological differences between the natural sciences and the humanities, they must once again be seen more in their *connectedness* – see *“Theology for the Third Millennium: An Ecumenical View”*, (1988, Doubleday).

<sup>49</sup> Capra, op. cit., 305.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, Afterword to the 4<sup>th</sup> Ed.

<sup>51</sup> <<http://bahai-library.com/reviews/weber.dialogues.html>>

<sup>52</sup> Renee Weber, *“Dialogues with Scientists and Sages: The Search for Unity”*, (1986, Routledge and Kegan Paul).



*rescuing His creatures from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction, hath received them into His Kingdom of incorruptible glory. Nothing short of His all-encompassing grace, His all-pervading mercy, could have possibly*

*achieved it. How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being.*