



The Bahá'u'lláh Impulse

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The spiritual impulse to pursue ever greater truth, beauty, harmony, and wisdom has run through the core of the whole history of human civilisation. Periodically through the centuries, prophetic figures have appeared who channeled this collective impulse into systems of spiritual teachings which have propelled civilisation forward and brought about transformations in human society. Each time, after their divine light rose and eventually set on the horizon of history, these prophetic events gave rise to generations of spiritual masters who then set out to explain these prophetic teachings, to elaborate the spiritual principles and practices embedded in them, and to make them accessible to more of humanity.

Historical Background

The mid-19th century was the most recent period of such historic upheaval. The establishment of industrialisation in Western societies and the rise of the scientific method propelled the Romanticism movement in literature and art to give voice to the deep disillusionment with the deadening impact of mechanisation on the human spirit. In response to some of the troubling implications of modernity, there arose in the early 19th century a host of messianic movements in Judeo-Christian and Islamic communities in different parts of the world. They anticipated the appearance of a new prophetic figure, understood as the return of the earlier one in each tradition, who would redeem the human spirit.

The most dramatic of these movements centered around the youthful figure of a Persian merchant who identified himself as the Bab - the Gate to the return of the Promised One of all earlier scriptures. He taught that humanity stood on the threshold of an era that would witness the restructuring of all aspects of life through new fields of learning and a profound transformation of its moral and spiritual life. At the heart of these events, he taught, was the coming of a universal Messenger of God, Whose appearance and Teachings would shake and eventually renew the very foundation of human society.¹

As we can imagine, such a radical claim was met with violent hostility, series of massacres, and persecutions which continue to this day in Iran. When the prophetic figure of Bahá'u'lláh, for whom the Bab was preparing people, did appear, He was thrown into the worst prison in Tehran, known as The Black Pit, to await execution. But through the intercession of a Russian diplomat, He was eventually exiled instead to the Ottoman Empire. His banishment from city to city in the Ottoman Empire aided the swift spreading

of a community of followers. Despite violent Islamic persecution, the movement for spiritual and social transformation spread and attracted increasingly followers from the West.

Bahá'u'lláh spent 40 years in exile and passed away in Akka, near the Bay of Haifa, where is now the center of the global Bahá'í movement. During those 40 years, He revealed a vast body of Writings, which, according to Bahá'í scholar Nader Saiedi, fall roughly into three periods. In the 1850s, Bahá'u'lláh's early mystical writings focused on the human being as noble, with the capacity to become godly and pure. In the 1860s, the focus was on the historical human, and the prejudices, superstitions, unfounded dogmas that arise out of a limited understanding of revelation and prophecy; as well as on the resulting collective traumas, which need to be healed and transcended. In the 1870s and beyond, the focus was on the universal human with the capacity to radiate divine virtue across the globe, and to usher in a Golden Age of planetary spiritual transformation toward unity in all of humanity's diversity.² The Divine Impulse released into collective human consciousness took hold.

Bahá'u'lláh's universal Teachings addressed the foundational questions that had preoccupied religious thinkers in the past, such as the reality of God, the role of Revelation in history, the relationship of the world's religious systems to one another, the meaning of faith, and the basis of moral authority in the organisation of human society. At the center of His Revelation is the establishment of a new Covenant between God and humankind, according to which humanity is now coming of age and is developing awareness of its oneness and of the earth as a single homeland. As Paul Lample, longtime member of the Universal House of Justice, the supreme elected Bahá'í global governing body, points

out, “This awakening opens the way to a new relationship between God and humankind.”³

This new relationship is nothing short of revolutionary. It redefined the spiritual impulse in terms of working toward radical social transformation based on universal spiritual principles of oneness, justice, and unity in a global age. A central expression of that is the upholding of equality between women and men worldwide, even in the Iranian context of oppressive attitudes to women. The first female follower of the Bab, a poetess known as Tahiriḥ (the Pure One), took off her veil publicly, causing an intense commotion in a traditional Muslim society and challenging religious and political orthodoxy. Her courageous campaign to educate and liberate the spirit of Muslim women in the East, for which she was eventually executed, coincides mysteriously with the first women’s rights convention at Seneca Falls, U.S. The spiritual impulse to establish equality between women and men was thus released.

Another central expression of the Bahá’í revolutionising of spirituality is the energetic commitment to the elimination of racial prejudice and the ideal of inter-racial unity. Inter-racial meetings, as well as Race Amity Conferences, were encouraged by `Abdu’l-Bahá in the United States since the first decade of the 20th century. The first Bahá’í inter-racial marriage in the U.S. dates back to 1912, and interracial marriages are very common among Bahá’ís.⁴

Bahá’u’lláh’s social teachings upheld that as humanity grows toward collective spiritual maturity, extremes of wealth and poverty will be eliminated, and a just and sustainable system of planetary governance will be created – one that represents every nation and ethnic group and upholds the dignity of every human being.

This rethinking of human spiritual history spread rapidly throughout the Middle East, as well as to Europe and the United States. With its spread, persecution also grew beyond the borders of Iran. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet authorities dispersed the highly-developed Bahá’í community of Ashkhabad. The German Bahá’í community, which was the largest in Europe, was persecuted and its institutions disbanded by the Nazi authorities.

Nonetheless, Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation had and continues to have spiritual repercussions beyond what we can grasp, and many who had no direct awareness of His Revelation have been inspired by the spirit of the age. As has always

happened in the spiritual history of human civilisation, a host of spiritual teachers arose simultaneously in different parts of the world, who taught the message of collective awakening and spiritual transformation and unification. Some examples are Sri Aurobindo’s teachings about the evolutionary ascent of humanity toward universal consciousness which spread from Asia into the West; and the Bulgarian sage Peter Deunov, who taught a universal Christianity purified of its dogmatic divisiveness and focused on love and wisdom.

The Divine Impulse Bahá’u’lláh released into collective consciousness was explicitly brought to the West between 1911 and 1913 by `Abdu’l-Bahá, the eldest son of Bahá’u’lláh. Also known as the Master, he travelled through Paris, London, and across the whole United States, and was invited to give talks in countless churches, synagogues, universities, mosques, and public spaces. He spoke fearlessly of world unity and the overcoming of racial prejudice in places where lynching was still rampant.

What were these core teachings released into modern consciousness by Bahá’u’lláh’s Impulse to awaken in the whole of humanity a renewed spiritual understanding of self, of society, of history, and of planetary restructuring?

Core Principles

Complementarity of Religion and Science

Unique to these Teachings is a historical perspective on the evolution of collective consciousness and human society. They elaborate the dialectic between inner and outer, mystical and social, into an integral understanding of the path to spiritual action for the transformation and unification of our complex planet. Below is a succinct summary offered in 1912 by the Master, `Abdu’l-Bahá, of the path to universal peace.

Religion must conform to reason and be in accord with the conclusions of science. For religion, reason and science are realities; therefore, these three, being realities, must conform and be reconciled. A question or principle which is religious in its nature must be sanctioned by science... and reason must confirm it in order that it may inspire confidence. If religious teaching... be at variance with science and reason, it is unquestionably superstition.⁵

This guiding orientation brought about the profound re-thinking of what Ken Wilber described, over a century later, as the four quadrants of human reality – internal life, or the realm of the ‘I’;

the interpersonal realm of ‘we’; the understanding of objective reality or ‘it’; and the understanding of society or ‘they’. Such re-thinking was no longer the esoteric occupation of a spiritual elite but rather accessible to ordinary people; encouraged as foundational to meaningful living in a global age.

Human Nature

Consistent with earlier spiritual understanding, human nature is understood as having three aspects – a body, a mind, and an immortal identity also known as the soul or spirit. The mind is the power of the human spirit and the link between the soul and the body, through which the two interact on each other. The human spirit is described in the following way:

In the world of existence there is nothing so important as spirit, nothing so essential as the spirit of man. The spirit of man is the most noble of phenomena. The spirit of man is the meeting between man and God. The spirit of man is the animus of human life and the collective center of all human virtues. The spirit of man is the cause of the illumination of this world.⁶

Human nature is “a reality which stands between light and darkness.”⁷ Its inner dynamism needs to be understood and its qualities of spirit need to be cultivated. `Abdu’l-Bahá explains that despite common belief that “the spirit is an accident which subsists through the substance of the body”, in fact “the rational soul is the substance through which the body subsists.” In Bahá’í understanding, the “rational soul is endowed from the beginning with individuality; it does not acquire it through the intermediary of the body.” However, “the individuality and identity of the rational soul may be strengthened in this world.”⁸

This strengthening is an intentional process of working with the mind, as the intermediary between the body and the rational soul, to cultivate detachment from excessive preoccupations with physical comforts and distractions, and to purify it, so that, as a mirror, it can reflect clearly the light of the spirit. This understanding is a precursor of the most recent science on the nature of mind, which describes it as the embodied and interpersonal flow of energy and information.⁹ The purer from attachments the flow of mind is, the more human consciousness evolves toward the ability to perceive oneness and to act out of that understanding. Thus, the evolved soul becomes a healer of the historical divisiveness of human society and an agent for social transformation toward unity in diversity. The ‘I’, the ‘we’, the ‘it’, and the

‘they’ become integrated into a holistic way of being and way of serving the evolution of collective consciousness. This rational and clear vision of the spiritual dynamic of reality – radical in the mid-19th century – has now become a commonplace understanding among thoughtful people from different professional and spiritual orientations.

Relationship to Religious Dispensations

Another central issue in human history that Bahá’u’lláh’s Teachings resolved is the relationship among different faith traditions. He introduced the clear organising concept of progressive revelation, according to which historical religious traditions represent a continuity of spiritual understanding and a unitary evolutionary process, which originates in the same Source, and advances human consciousness in accordance with the readiness of the time. From this point of view, God as the Infinite Unknowable manifests periodically in the form of radiant Beings, such as Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Mohammad, The Báb, Bahá’u’lláh and

the many Spiritual Teachers unrecorded in indigenous history, to guide humanity on its evolutionary path. This understanding of the Manifestations as intermediaries between the Unknowable and humanity, expressions of “supermind” and “Truth-Consciousness,” was later articulated by Sri Aurobindo in India.¹⁰ It also distinguishes the spiritual degree of impact of these Luminaries and founders of religious traditions from the spiritual teachers who then elaborate and further disseminate the teachings.

This understanding offers a clear path to overcoming traditional inter-religious animosities. It establishes that in each religious tradition, we can distinguish the universal spiritual principles from the historically circumscribed social teachings which become outworn with time. While people come to spiritual teachings along different religious and spiritual paths, the universal principles unite, and the particularity of different religious and cultural heritages represents the richness of collective human culture.

It also makes clear the relationship between spirituality, religion, and society. Spirituality refers to our awakening to the spiritual nature of reality and the laws that govern it. Religion structures our relationship to spiritual reality in the context of social life in a particular historical period. It establishes what I have described as the zone of proximal development for the social organisation that is the growing edge for that stage of collective evolution.¹¹ For example, in the new millennium to which the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh were addressed, the zone of proximal development is the establishment of a world federation of states, with governance based on universal spiritual principles that ensure just and sustainable management of planetary resources. Such a form of social evolution, which would have been unthinkable during the Christian dispensation, for example, because of the much earlier stage of development of human consciousness, was nonetheless what Christ described as the coming of world peace, and the founders of other religious traditions referred to as the Return.



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This also implies that outdated social teachings of different religious traditions need to be released due to their divisive impact on collective growth toward a new form of planetary social organisation. That in no way invalidates the power and depth of impact of each religious tradition. It simply establishes religion as an evolutionary phenomenon – along with all other phenomena on this plane of reality. Hence, true religion channels the Divine force into social structures and processes, through which spirituality becomes socially generative for the majority of humanity.

Bahá'u'lláh also established a clear spiritual methodology of consultative grassroots governance processes, applicable to the full diversity of the human family, for the movement toward global unity. A hundred years later, the Earth Federation movement carried forward this vision. Now countless non-governmental organisations are working on the many complex aspects of the establishment of just global institutions and systems of governance toward sustainable peace. The Bahá'u'lláh Impulse, which brought about tremendous upheavals in the last two centuries, is now visibly coming to fruition.

In 1912, in a talk to a Unitarian Church in New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá summed it up in this way:

... in this great century the most important accomplishment is the unity of mankind. Although in former centuries and times this subject received some measure of mention and consideration, it has now become the paramount issue and question in the religious and political conditions of the world. ... In this century of illumination, hearts are inclined toward agreement and fellowship, and minds are thoughtful upon the question of the unification of mankind. There is an emanation of the universal consciousness today which clearly indicates the dawn of a great unity.¹²

We see increasingly the emergence of new collective centers – something Bahá'u'lláh forewarned would be necessary in this new age of reaching collective spiritual maturity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains how previous collective centers have evolved and in time become outworn:

In the contingent world there are many collective centers which are conducive to association and unity between ... men ... patriotism is a collective center; nationalism is a collective center; identity of interests is a collective center; political alliance is a collective center; the union of ideals

is a collective center, and the prosperity of the world of humanity is dependent upon the organisation and promotion of the collective centers. Nevertheless, all the above institutions are, in reality, the matter and not the substance, accidental and not eternal—temporary and not everlasting. With the appearance of great revolutions and upheavals, all these collective centers are swept away.¹³

Science is also viewed as a collective center of illumination, as it tends to the illumination of the world of humanity... It is the cause of eternal honor to man, and its sovereignty is far greater than the sovereignty of kings ... the noblest center is a center wherein the sciences and arts are taught and studied ... the scientist through his beneficent achievements invades the regions of ignorance, conquering the realm of minds and hearts ... flooding the dark regions and recesses of ignorance with illumination.¹⁴

Bahá'u'lláh suggests that in the age of oneness, a qualitatively new collective center of illumination will emerge. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes it in this way:

In our solar system the center of illumination is the sun itself ... the one source of the existence and development of all phenomenal things ... Without this quickening impulse there would be no growth ... Likewise, in the spiritual realm of intelligence and idealism there must be a center of illumination, and that center is the everlasting, ever-shining Sun, the Word of God. Its lights are the lights of reality which have shone upon humanity, illumining the realm of thought and morals ... the cause of the education of souls and the source of the enlightenment of hearts ...¹⁵

This 1912 perspective suggests that the particularities of a specific religious tradition can be compared to the different “dawning places” of the one and only phenomenal sun. Their essence is the same. It points to what the interfaith and interspirituality movements towards the end of the 20th century recognised as the “nine points of agreement” of universal spirituality.¹⁶

In summary, the Divine Impulse Bahá'u'lláh released into collective consciousness in the mid-19th century has given rise, over time, to an evolutionary universal language of spirit and action that brings out our highest potentiality as it also honors our roots. More and more, unity is becoming a condition of the human spirit, cultivated in the context of working to build diverse and united communities.

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Endnotes

- 1 See Bahá'u'lláh's *Teachings on Spiritual Reality*, Compilation. Paul Lample, Introduction, p. 11-12.
- 2 Saiedi, Nader. *Payam-Bahá'í*, October/November 2017.
- 3 Paul Lample, *Compilation on Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings on Spiritual Reality*, p. 16-18.
- 4 For further understanding of how the Bahá'í Faith treats the issue of racism, see Rutstein's “*Racism: Unraveling the Fear*”, and Perry's “*The Last War: Racism, Spirituality, and the Future of Civilisation.*” For an overview of the current status of racial integration throughout the global Bahá'í community, see the annual editions of *The Bahá'í World*.
- 5 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 394.
- 6 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 239-40.
- 7 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 464-65.
- 8 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 66.
- 9 Daniel Siegel, *Mindsight*.
- 10 Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*.
- 11 Elena Mustakova, *Global Unitive Healing*.
- 12 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 82.
- 13 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of the Divine Plan*, p. 101.
- 14 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 348-49.
- 15 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 93-94.
- 16 See Mustakova, *Global Unitive Healing*, p. 206.