

A Study on the Bahá'í Principle of Oneness of Humanity: Rising Above Self-centered Nationalism in the Quest for Solutions to Global Ecological Crises

HE Qionghui

(School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University)

Abstract: Ecological crises have become an existential threat for humankind as a whole. Many of the planet-wide challenges such as climate change are deeply linked to self-centered nationalism that prioritizes the interest of a nation over that of humankind. What can empower the nations of the world, which have been accustomed to competing with each other for far too long, to transform their ingrained patterns of thought and begin to unite as one family in order to conquer the challenges confronting humanity today? This paper explores how the Bahá'í principle of oneness of humanity, coupled with the concept of unity in diversity and the analogy of an organic social body, can serve as a powerful source of thought that will empower people to work out effective solutions and find a unified global approach to address and reverse these ecological crises.

Key words: ecological crises; oneness of humanity; Bahá'í; unity in diversity; organic social body

1. Introduction

The impacts caused by the planet-wide ecological crises (climate change, sea level rise, global warming, desertification, air and ocean pollution etc.) are no longer confined to one local place, or a country, instead, to humankind as a whole! Many of these challenges arise within the context of deeply-rooted, self-centered nationalism that prioritizes the interest of a nation over that of humankind.¹ It is apparent that no country can tackle these problems successfully

¹ Conversi, Daniele. 'The Ultimate Challenge: Nationalism and Climate Change'. *Nationalities Papers* 48, no. 4 (July 2020): 625–36. <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2020.18>.

alone. Thus, governments, organizations and individuals of countries all over the world are impelled to urgently cooperate with each other to find feasible and practicable solutions to these crises. However, the world today is still afflicted by the destructive forces of disintegration characterized by disagreements, dissensions, conflicts and even wars. All these destructive forces of disintegration are barriers to the path to cooperation. Then what power can clear up those barriers? And what can empower the nations of the world, which have been accustomed to competing with each other for far too long, to transform their ingrained patterns of thought and begin to unite as one family in order to conquer the challenges confronting humanity today?

At this critical stage to tackle the ecological crises, the diverse peoples of the world are in an urgent need of a cognition on human-beings that can guide people to be united and cooperative in getting rid of the barriers to reach solutions. This transformation of cognition entails one from the old ingrained competitive pattern of self-interest to the principle of the oneness of humanity mankind, a new paradigm of thought that has the creative power to guide people by clarifying their fundamental notions of human life. Meanwhile, these transformations require a process of systematic and purposeful learning about the harmonization of relationships between individuals, institutions, and communities — from the local to the global. Only in this way will humanity learn how to rise above narrow nationalism and face the challenges now confronting it in a more unified, coordinated, and effective manner. Toward this end, the discussion that follows offers a few initial insights into the concept of oneness of humanity that is derived from the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. The young religion had emerged out of the Bábí millenarian movement in the mid-19th century, and has now spread over the world, with millions of followers from almost every ethnic and religious background. It proclaims, in addition to oneness of mankind, the common origin and purpose of religions; the abolition of religious, racial and ethnic prejudice and violence; the equality of women and men; harmony between science and religion; and the advancement towards a new civilization whose fruit is universal peace.²

² See Peter Smith, *The Babi and Bahá'í Religions: From Messianic Shiism to a World Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1987); Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Iqán: The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2003); 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982.

2. Oneness of humanity from the origin of creation

From the Bahá'í perspective, the awareness of oneness of humanity can be awakened first of all by the reality that human-beings share the same origin of creation. This can be demonstrated in the teachings of both Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of Bahá'í Faith, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the central leader of the Bahá'í Faith after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh. In one of the verses of the book, *The Hidden Words*, Bahá'u'lláh conveyed, in the tone of God, the message that man had been created from the same source and should manifest oneness among each other.

Children of Men! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, ... and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory. ³

Bahá'ís hold that human-beings are created from the same substance and that no one should think his nation or race or he himself is superior to others. This perception can help remove people's narrow-mindedness shown as nationalism or patriotism or personal arrogance, which often becomes the cause of competition, disunity, conflicts or even wars. On the creation of man, 'Abdu'l-Bahá has offered further interpretation:

There is no doubt that initially there was a single origin: ... It is therefore evident that originally matter was one, and that one matter appeared in a different form in each element. Thus various forms appeared, and as they appeared, they each assumed an independent form and became a specific element. But this distinction

³ Bahá'u'lláh. *The Hidden Words* (68)

attained its full completion and realization only after a very long time. Then these elements were composed, arranged, and combined in infinite forms; in other words, from the composition and combination of these elements countless beings appeared. This composition and arrangement arose, through the wisdom of God and His ancient might, from one natural order.⁴

It is expressed in the above statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that man has been created with the same matter by God through God’s wisdom from one natural order. Therefore, man has no excuse to feel superior for his own nation or race to others. As a matter of fact, even if civilization of mankind has advanced for thousands of years, discriminations are still common in some countries. Therefore, it is vital that the light of oneness of humanity can illumine all the dark corners of the earth shrouded by all types of prejudice.

3. Unity in diversity

Differences in ethnical origins, language and tradition, thought and habit, are often the cause of disunity and enmity. In today’s world, conflicts and even wars resulted from differences in races, religions or political views etc. are still torturing the world. But that does not have to be the unavoidable scenario.

Take nature as an example. It is diversity in nature that makes the world rich and beautiful. A garden with colorful flowers and various plants must be more attractive than one with only one type of flowers. The same is true with human-beings. It is just the diverse cultures of different nations that add charm to human’s life. This implicit meaning in diversity can find best illustration in the Bahá’í teachings. Diversity is the sign of the perfection in God’s creation according to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “For all existing things, whether on earth or in the heavens, even this limitless firmament and all that it contains, have been most befittingly created, arranged, composed, ordered, and completed, and suffer no imperfection.”⁵ He further compared humanity to flowers to demonstrate the beauty and unity of diversity: "In reality all are members

⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Some Answered Questions (P181)

⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Some Answered Questions, Part 4: 47 (P179)

of one human family -- children of one Heavenly Father. Humanity may be likened unto the varicolored flowers of one garden. There is unity in diversity. Each sets off and enhances the other's beauty."⁶

The message of unity in diversity, which is so much and so repeatedly emphasized in the Baha'i writings, can best be summarized in this exhortation of Baha'u'llah to mankind: "The Tabernacle of Unity has been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers."⁷ To achieve that vision, however, would be a long process. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, the tree of mankind need to be protected and cultivated "until it reaches perfection." Education, training and mutual assistance are needed. "There are souls in the human world who are ignorant; we must make them knowing. Some growing upon the tree are weak and ailing; we must assist them toward health and recovery. If they are as infants in development, we must minister to them until they attain maturity." Not only that, tolerance, understanding, all-embracing love and wisdom are also required in order to help people avoid debasing and belittling those defective fellowmen and build unity on earth. "We should never detest and shun them as objectionable and unworthy. We must treat them with honor, respect and kindness; for God has created them and not Satan. They are not manifestations of the wrath of God but evidences of His divine favor."⁸

4. An organic society

Though the ecological crises, conflicts among people and challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic today might put some in despair, thoughtful people striving for solutions to all the crises should, instead, perceive the crises as a vocation to build a united organic society so that all of us with a shared fate can live a more peaceful, harmonious and prosperous life.

The conception that humanity should be conceived as a single organic social body has been elaborated in a large number of Bahá'í texts. In the first place, Bahá'u'lláh drew the analogy in a tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. The Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing institution of the

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Divine Philosophy (p.25)

⁷ Shoghi Effendi. The Goal of a New World Order, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/world-order-bahauallah/>

⁸ 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The Promulgation of Universal Peace. (Talks in New York, 1-15 July 1912:82)

worldwide Bahá'í community that is located in Haifa, Israel, elaborated on the analogy in a letter stressing the cooperation as the principle that governs the functioning of that system: “And just as the viability of every cell and every organ is contingent upon the health of the body as a whole, so should the prosperity of every individual, every family, every people be sought in the well-being of the entire human race.”⁹

This organic analogy also entails the vital participation of every individual in promoting the well-being of the world. If we follow the analogy through, it can be easily observed in the human body, every cell, every organ and every nerve has its special part to play, and only when all of them do their job can the body become healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. “No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it or receiving from it.”¹⁰ This is true of the body of mankind.

Nevertheless, at this transitional stage in the advancement of human history, the body of society is wracked with diseases characterized by the force of destructive disintegration. The diseases can be attributed to corruption, materialism, competition, ethnic conflicts, religious fanaticism and injustice etc. To combat the diseases, the individuals, organizations and governments, as the constituent parts of the world of humanity, are impelled to cooperate together to search for remedies, just as each organ of the body must work together to treat the disease of the body. However, not until the conception of unity in diversity in the organic society is clearly recognized in people's thought, can the cooperation among diverse peoples be firmly achieved and then the remedies for the diseases of the social body be found.

Bahá'u'lláh asserts the principle of unity as a priority to treat the disease. “The well-being of mankind,” he said, “its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.”¹¹ This point is further illustrated in the following words by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá:

This is the oneness of the world of humanity. ... Holy souls are like soil which has been plowed and tilled with much earnest labor, the thorns and thistles cast aside and all weeds uprooted. Such soil is most fruitful, and the harvest from it will prove full

⁹ The Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013, to the Bahá'is of Iran.

¹⁰ The Universal House of Justice, September 1964, to the Bahá'is of the world.

¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh. Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 286.

and plenteous. In this same way man must free himself from the weeds of ignorance, thorns of superstitions and thistles of imitations that he may discover reality in the harvests of true knowledge. Otherwise, the discovery of reality is impossible, contention and divergence of religious belief will always remain, and mankind, like ferocious wolves, will rage and attack each other in hatred and antagonism.”¹²

Within the framework of Bahá’í teachings, the Bahá’í followers in reality are making efforts to rebuild communities according to the principle of oneness of humanity regardless of color, class or creed. Such communities are characterized by promoting both the spiritual and material advancement, powered by their ever-flowing Divine Source.

5. Conclusion

Although it is imperative for people to transform their old cognition of disintegration to the new principle of oneness of humanity in order to find feasible solutions to the threatening problems afflicting mankind today, this task of transformation will no doubt be work of centuries of efforts of all mankind. Yet the teachings of the Bahá’í Faith and the early experience of the Bahá’í community offers hope regarding the practicality of this vision. It suggests that humanity might indeed learn how to function as a single social organism.

“The world is but one country and mankind its citizens.... Let not a man glory in that he loves his country; let him rather glory in this, that he loves his kind.”¹³ Considering the world as one country echoes the idea of a global village which we often hear of in this age of globalization. If this ideal could be gradually translated into action, the fire of narrow-minded patriotism and nationalism could be extinguished, which will empower mankind to find a unified global approach to address and reverse these ecological crises.

¹² ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The Promulgation of Universal Peace/Talks in Boston and Maiden, 25-29 August, 1912:96

¹³ Shoghi Effendi. The Goal of a New World Order, <https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/shoghi-effendi/world-order-bahauallah/>