#### A Bahá'í Approach to the Environment

#### Nader Sajedi

The environment has become recognized as one of the most urgent and critical problems facing humanity at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In response to this fundamental and universal challenge, a new form of consciousness which recognizes the necessity of protecting the environment has slowly been emerging. But in spite of the adoption of some policies aimed at saving the environment, the protection of the environment has remained a residual and secondary issue for both political leaders and popular cultures in many parts of the world. The failure to give primacy to this crisis has many interacting causes among which a materialistic and mechanistic worldview and the structural imperatives of the nationalistic and military organization of the world are among the most important. At the same time, however, for some groups environmentalism has become a new form of the sacred, substituting for traditional religious orientations. This paradoxical approach to the environment represents a blend of materialism and spiritualism, an evidence of the inadequacy of traditional religious solutions when applied to modern global problems, and humanity's longing for a new dynamic, progressive, and globally oriented spiritual perspective.

In this paper I will argue that the Bahá'í teachings provide a new spiritual and cultural perspective in confronting the contemporary environmental crisis. Here I will concentrate on the Bahá'í philosophical position on the question of the environment. Through a systematic analysis of Bahá'í theology and social teachings I will investigate the Bahá'í approach to nature and the normative and structural reorientations necessary for saving the environment. I will first explore the roots and forms of the modern mechanistic approach to nature and culture which legitimizes and informs the existing pattern of human behavior. Next I will discuss the Bahá'í conception of nature and culture by explicating the Bahá'í conception of being. In the following section I will discuss the modern normative concept of social contract and contrast it with the Bahá'í concept of covenant as the central organizing principle of life and culture.

## 1. The Rise of the Mechanistic Conception of Nature and Culture

One's approach towards the environment is informed by one's conceptions of nature, culture, self, body, others, and the sacred. In other words, the complex of beliefs and attitudes concerning the relation of God to nature, the relation of human beings with each other, the relation of soul and body, and the relation of culture to nature determines the normative premises of one's approach towards the environment. With the rise of the modern, industrial, capitalist, nationalist, and technological social order, a materialistic and mechanistic worldview began to develop and dominate Western consciousness. The outcome of this approach to life has been an obsessive emphasis on material values and selfish desires which has defined the meaning and purpose of life in terms of the maximization of consumption and material gratification in the context of a competitive, aggressive, and unequal world economy. The result has been mass poverty on the one hand, and an increasing disparity between the masses of the desperately poor and comfortably rich on the other, as well as the increasing degradation and destruction of the environment.

Because of the significance of this foundational (and mostly unconscious) determination of behavior we need to examine the phenomenology of this materialistic consciousness and the history of its emergence, lest we fall into the mistake of considering the current dominant worldview as natural and normal or an eternal curse of humanity. In fact, the materialistic and mechanistic worldview is only a recent and historically specific phenomenon which is linked to a particular type of organization of life and society, and one which can and must be transcended if humanity's will to life is to be realized. In the next section we will briefly review the premodern conception of nature and culture and the two stages of the development of the modern mechanistic worldview.

## A. The Premodern conception of nature and culture

Although there have been various interpretations of nature and culture in nonindustrialized and premodern societies, all those interpretations and worldviews shared a fundamental principle in their understanding of nature and society. This fundamental principle was the *organic* conception of both nature and culture. This organic conception of nature and culture was rooted in an organic definition of reality. Consequently, the premodern worldview not only maintained the organic character of both nature and culture but also emphasized the existence of an organic interrelation, exchange, harmony, and unity between the two realms. In that traditional

theoretical framework, the separation and alienation of culture, or social reality, from nature, or natural world, was unthinkable.

As Foucault and others have pointed out, the traditional conception of reality was based upon an epistemology of *resemblance*. All being was understood as a living organic reality with interconnected parts. This reality was perceived to be organized in a hierarchy of levels such that each level mirrored all of reality. Each level or circle was assumed to be constituted by internal relations which were proportionate to the relation among the levels or circles themselves. For instance, the relation of God and the created world was repeated in the relation of soul to body, reason to passion, king to subjects, man to woman, free to slave, and the like. Consequently the epistemology of resemblance was based upon the logic of proportionality, metaphor, analogy, and similitude. One of the most important expressions of this organic idea of reality was the ancient Greek notion of the microcosm and macrocosm. According to classical Greek philosophy, the human being was the mirror of the cosmos, containing within itself all of reality. This theory not only affirmed the organic structure of being as such, but it also postulated a relation of solidarity between human beings and nature.

The same organic conception of the universe was emphasized in the mystic doctrines of Pythagoras, according to whom all reality was constituted by a mathematical logic identical with the cosmic *logos* or reason. All the heavenly bodies were thought to be organized in relations of proportionality corresponding to musical tones and intervals, and together they created a cosmic harmony and melody, the "music of the spheres." The same logic of resemblance and proportion was emphasized by other Greek philosophers and was repeated in Medieval Christian, Islamic, and Jewish thought as philosophers conceived of the cosmos in terms of conscious and rational realities like the "world soul" and heavenly bodies with intellect. The universe was thought to be filled with intellects and souls characterized by love, sympathy, meditation, and self-consciousness which determined the movements of stars and events on the earth. Causation was perceived in various ways including the possibility of affecting phenomena through relations of sympathy, antipathy, and affect. It was a universe filled with ghosts, spirits, and magic. Magical consciousness was the necessary product of this causation of sympathy and the proportional logic of reality, in which changing the proportion of certain elements could alter the course of events at will.

The same spiritual and magical conception of nature can be found among the humanists of the Renaissance. From the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries we witness the last systematic expression of the same organic logic in Western societies. One of the most important

manifestations of this worldview was alchemy--the search for gold and the "elixir" which would transmute base metal into gold. Alchemy was the dominant form of the conception of natural relations which was based on the same logic of proportion and interrelatedness. It expressed the same principle of the solidarity of all beings and the mutual connection of all entities.

In this complex system of proportions and sympathy, human beings were also defined as spiritual realities endowed with a divine soul and a moral mission, as the children of God and the mirrors of the divine. Human history was viewed as part of a divine drama in which the will of God reflected itself in the course of history through diverse revelations. Although human history was defined in terms of the Fall and expulsion from paradise, the end of history was nothing but the reestablishment of the kingdom of God on the earth. Therefore, both nature and culture were perceived as spiritual and organic realities with mutual connections and interactions.

Another explication of this organic and spiritual conception of the universe can be found in nineteenth-century ethnographic descriptions of nonindustrial societies. Early anthropologists interpreted preindustrial and non-Western patterns of culture in different forms, including animism, totemism, and ancestor worship. The significance of mythology in these cultures led to many attempts aimed at interpreting the form and content of various mythologies. Despite the theoretical differences and debates, all the theories affirmed the organic conception of nature and culture in these mythologies. To exemplify the dynamics of the organic conception of reality I will briefly refer to the theories of two major European social theorists: Lucien Levi-Bruhl and Claude Levi-Strauss.

Following Emile Durkheim, Levi-Bruhl was concerned with the interpretation of a vast amount of ethnographic data indicating the prevalence of a totemic logic in many premodern societies. One of the distinctive characteristics of totemism as an ideal type has been the mutual interrelation and metamorphosis of culture and nature. In an ideal-typical totemic logic, each clan was characterized by the worship of a totem object which was a natural being such as a plant or an animal. The totem was the symbol of the clan and the name of the tribe. Members of the clan saw themselves as offsprings of the totem object, which was believed to be the ancestor of the clan. The totem object was considered sacred and was protected by various rites and ceremonies. While approaching the totem object was prohibited in profane life, it was the object of celebration in collective sacred ceremonies. The totem was cooked and eaten by the tribe in religious festivals so that the totem was internalized by the clan members, thereby affirming the identity and unity of the totem and tribe members.

For Levi-Bruhl, totemic logic was opposed to modern, rational, and scientific logic. According to him, the distinctive element of modern and scientific logic is the law of contradiction which affirms that contradictory propositions cannot be simultaneously true, that A is A and cannot be not-A. For Levi-Bruhl, totemic logic was the opposite of modern and rational logic precisely because it was based on contradiction and metamorphosis. As Levi-Bruhl pointed out, in the totemic consciousness humans are simultaneously nonhuman. Humans are both human and totemic, since it is the totem, a natural object, which is the ancestor of the tribe. Religious ceremonies represent other forms of this metamorphosis. Mythic logic reflects the continuous transformation of nature into culture and vice versa. Levi-Bruhl also argued that the logic of premodern societies is based on the fundamental principle of the homogeneity of all beings. The essence of reality was held to be a creative force that took different forms in different things. That is why, Levi-Bruhl argued, premoderns believed in the unity of human beings and other natural species, portrayed in art beings that are simultaneously human and animal, identified humans as group members and not as independent individuals, and identified particular objects with their species.<sup>ii</sup>

Levi-Strauss criticized parts of the theories of Durkheim and Levi-Bruhl. He rejected a qualitative gap between modern logic and totemic consciousness and questions the universality and even the religious character of totemic systems. However, he affirmed in a different form the underlying principle of mutual exchange and the kinship of the cultural and natural worlds in mythological logic. Mythology reflects a concrete representation of the system of classification and the structural relations which constitute the identity of a group and its relation to the other groups and the world. The component parts of these relations vary in different mythologies, but the underlying structure of exchange relations remains intact. The harmony, kinship, and metamorphosis of the culture and nature remain universal while the substantive elements of these relations vary from group to group. It is a structure which affirms both the opposition and unity of cultural and natural realities. In other words, what is crucial in all mythic systems of classification is that the social and cultural system of classification is mirrored in the system of natural classification. It is the principle of homology among different classification patterns that defines the structure of mythology. This leads again to a system of proportion and repetition. For instance, the relation between the sacred and the profane is repeated in relations of purity and impurity, male and female, superior and inferior, fertilizing rain and fertilized land, and bad season and good season.iii

Regardless of differing theoretical interpretations of the ethnographic data, one conclusion emerges out of the diverse accounts of premodern societies: the organizing principle of their worldview affirmed the universal solidarity of all beings. iv

## B. From Descartes and Jansenism to the Enlightenment

The transition from the organic conception of reality to the mechanistic paradigm occurred through various developments between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. French philosophy of the seventeenth century was strongly influenced by Cartesian and Jansenist currents. Both perspectives, one philosophical and the other theological, set the stage for a new conceptualization of nature and culture. Rene Descartes, whose principle of methodic doubt is perceived as one of the most important moments in the birth of modernity, divided reality into two fundamental substances: mind and body. According to Descartes, mind and body are exact opposites in terms of their essences. Mind is substance endowed with consciousness but lacking extension. In contrast, matter lacks consciousness but has extension. It is important to realize that Cartesian philosophy was intended to demonstrate the reality of the spiritual nature of human beings and to prove the existence and wisdom of God. Descartes' statement "I think therefore I am," was intended as a proof of the independent reality of the soul which became the foundation for his proofs of the existence of God.

However, Descartes' philosophy unintentionally initiated a theoretical model which led to the dominance of the mechanistic paradigm. The crucial step taken by Descartes was the substitution of a mechanical conception of nature for the previous organic view. As we saw, Descartes defined matter as lacking consciousness but endowed with extension. This meant that extension became the essence of matter. That is why the realm of nature was defined simply in terms of extension. It meant that the essential properties of matter are nothing but their mathematical quantities in terms of different dimensions. The realm of nature was thus stripped of any spiritual, organic, conscious, living, or magical characteristics. The Pythagorean mystic and spiritual mathematics was replaced by abstract and uniform mathematics. From then on mathematics became the language and principle of physics and physical reality, while the realm of nature became a uniform space subject to calculation, quantification, formalization, operationalization, and domination. For Descartes this implied that the realm of nature should be understood in terms of mechanical phenomena. A machine works by mechanical laws, and the material universe is nothing but a gigantic machine. This mechanistic conception of nature was

compatible with the emerging industrial and capitalist economic and political structure which conceived of the world as a neutral space for human gratification and consumption.

Cartesian doctrine reduced nature to a mere mechanical complex. However, it still defined human beings, culture, and society in spiritual and organic terms. This opposition was still partly compatible with some forms of moral considerations with regard to human treatment of the environment, as the normative imperatives of a spiritual definition of human beings rejected overemphasis on material consumption and gratification. It was precisely this element, however, which was soon to be eliminated in the eighteenth-century philosophy of the Enlightenment. After the Cartesian reduction of nature to a mechanical model, it was easy to reduce human beings to that same model as well. Descartes had started a process which defied his own intention.

The application of the mechanistic and materialistic model to the realm of culture was assisted, unintentionally, by Jansenism. Within the context of Catholic France, the Jansenist school advanced an extreme understanding of the doctrines of original sin and predestination. Following a long line of church fathers, Jansenist theology maintained that human nature had been corrupted by the experience of original sin and the fall from grace. The consequence of this doctrine was a particular conception of the logic of human action and action determination. For Jansenists, humans, with their fallen and corrupt nature, are naturally inclined towards selfish desires and hedonistic goals. The consequence of this theology was the development of a rationalistic and utilitarian theory of action: humans are moved by the desire to maximize their gain and gratification and to minimize their pain and suffering. Pleasure and pain became the supreme determinants of selfish human social action. Seventeenth-century French philosophers like Boussuet developed a theory of social order compatible with this utilitarian psychology. According to this theory, although humans act in accordance with the logic of sin and selfishness, the intercession of divine providence will create social harmony and order out of the chaos of selfish acts. This was partly through the long-term interests of the individuals who cared for their safety and profit maximization.

Jansenist thought initiated a process which was self-destructive. The emphasis on a utilitarian theory of action and psychology gradually became the ground of a materialistic and mechanistic conception of human beings. The philosophers of the Enlightenment inverted the logic of Jansenist values and elevated the pursuit of individual interests to the supreme moral virtue. Pleasure and pain as the determinants of human will and action defined universal human nature. This time, however, it was perceived as rational and moral, not distorted or fallen. Many

advocates of the French philosophy of the Enlightenment reduced human beings to mechanical devices and stripped human beings of anything spiritual, sublime, divine, organic, or mysterious. La Mettrie's book, *Man a Machine* (1749) and Holbach's *System of Nature* (1770) are typical representatives of this new paradigm of thought. The assumption of the natural character of human beings led the French philosophers of the Enlightenment to reject the idea of freedom of will, and to insist on the absolute predictability of human behavior. Like all other objects, human behavior was subject to universal laws and situational determination. The utilitarian theory of action provided that universal social law.

The significance of the philosophical and social theoretical premises of the French Enlightenment for the construction of modern conceptions of self, society, value, freedom, rationality, nature, and culture is a well-known fact. Major trends of the French Enlightenment epistemology reduced human knowledge to the association of ideas derived from physical sensations and impressions. Its empiricist theory of knowledge located the criterion of truth in observable and empirical perceptions. Its theory of action postulated a universal hedonistic and rationalistic human nature which was compatible with the requirements of social order and harmony of interests through the operations of market relations. Its political theory defended competitive capitalism, liberalist politics, and the rejection of tradition and revelation as requirements of human nature. The metaphor of nature became the basis of its value judgment.

These trends of the French Enlightenment completed the process initiated by Descartes and the Jansenists: Not only nature but also culture became a materialistic and mechanical phenomenon. VII The combination of these two reductionistic premises provided the ideological presuppositions for a cultural pattern of economic and political orientation which reduced the meaning of life to the accumulation of material possessions and the maximization of wealth, consumption, and the pursuit of material gratification. The addition of this ideological orientation to the emerging capitalistic and nationalistic structures created a destructive and aggressive orientation which ultimately led to both increasing international inequality and the destruction of a fragile environment.

Many social theorists have defined the basic problem of modernity in terms of the Cartesian separation of mind and body, or culture and nature. This theoretical proposition, however, is seriously one sided. What is distinctive about modernity is rather the *materialistic* definition of both nature and human beings. Beginning with the French Enlightenment, it was not the opposition of mental and physical, but the reduction of both to essentially similar and mechanical entities that defined the foundational paradigm of modernity. Even those who

criticize the idea of the separation of mind and body usually reject any spiritual definition of human beings or human consciousness. But even the alleged opposition of mind and body is understandable under a reductionistic mechanistic framework. Humans must dominate and control nature precisely because of the materialistic character of both nature and culture.

## 2. The Bahá'í Conception of Nature and Culture

During the 1860s at a time when the world was dazzled by Western technological, scientific, industrial, military, and economic developments, Bahá'u'lláh addressed the people and leaders of the world and, while he celebrated the egalitarian and democratic orientations of Western modernity, warned them against the immoderate and extreme measures of Western material civilization. He made it clear that the prevalent one-sided and immoderate cultural pattern would lead to fatal and destructive consequences. He warned against the potential of modern technology to pollute the atmosphere and called for a new cultural and structural approach to reality. Various teachings of the Bahá'í Faith--such as the demilitarization of the world, the adoption of a global approach to the problems confronting humanity, the rejection of the brutal treatment of animals, the importance of agriculture, the equality of men and women, the elimination of prejudices, the encouragement of vegetarianism, and the like--are directly and indirectly related to the aim of the protection of the environment and the emergence of a new form of harmonious and dynamic relation between nature and culture. Here, however, I will not discuss all the various Bahá'í principles which are relevant to the contemporary challenge of the environment, but only the general philosophical and structural premises of the Bahá'í worldview concerning the relation of culture to nature.

Before discussing the Bahá'í approach to the question of the environment it should be made clear that the Bahá'í position is qualitatively different from most current environmentalist doctrines. In the Bahá'í perspective, the problem of the environment cannot and should not be dissociated from other problems confronting humanity. It is only by taking a holistic and integrative approach aimed at realizing all the potentialities of human beings that a harmonious relation with nature can be achieved as well. This fundamental principle has a number of implications for the Bahá'í approach to the environment. More specifically, four major propositions are usually advocated by some environmentalists which are rejected by the Bahá'í teachings: 1) Many have argued that protection of the environment requires the rejection of belief in a transcendental God. Advocates of this theory find pantheistic or materialistic doctrines

the only alternatives compatible with the protection of the environment. The Bahá'í position, as we will see, rejects this idea and proposes a metaphysics of manifestation. 2) Another proposition frequently repeated by some pro-environment philosophies is that a harmonious conception of nature and culture must reject any definition of humans as beings endowed with unique and higher potentialities (or value) than those of animals, plants, and minerals. According to this view any hierarchical conception of the relation of humans to other natural beings will lead to abuse of the environment. The Bahá'í teachings, as we will see, do not support this thesis. On the contrary they assert an organic relation between nature and culture precisely because of their nonmaterialistic and spiritual conception of being which assigns a unique responsibility and moral mission to human beings. 3) According to some environmental theories, protection of the environment is opposed to any policy of socioeconomic development and rationalization. The Bahá'í approach, however, is one of the harmony of instrumental and moral rationalizations which leads to both protection of the environment and social development. 4) Some of the advocates of environmentalism have defended a radical localistic politics in which residents of each locality would have absolute sovereignty over the resources of that locality. The Bahá'í Faith proposes a restructuring of society which is neither localistic nor nationalistic. The Bahá'í model is both global and local, characterized by the principle of the unity in diversity.

## A. From Weber's Typology of Religious Ethics to the Bahá'í Theology of Revelation

In order to discuss the Bahá'í concept of nature and its relation to culture, it is useful to examine the implications of alternative theological systems for the question of environmental protection. In discussing this issue I am will apply Max Weber's typology of religious ethics to the question of the environment. Weber was interested in the question of economic rationalization, and he wanted to know the reasons for the emergence of industrialization, capitalism, and economic growth in Western Europe. In his theory, different religious belief systems will lead to differing orientations to economic behavior which will affect the tendency and possibility of the rationalization of economics. The most important axis of classification of theological meaning systems in Weber's theory is the distinction between *asceticism* and *mysticism*. According to Weber, asceticism is in principle a theological orientation according to which God is a transcendental reality outside the world. In this doctrine the invisible realm of God is the realm of morality whereas the material and natural world is a realm of evil and corruption. This opposition between the realms of spirit and flesh results in a particular relation of the believer to

the world. The ascetic believer sees himself as the tool of the divine will. Because of the transcendental character of the divine realm he cannot experience God. Consequently he becomes an instrument in the hand of God in order to realize the will of God in a corrupt and evil world. The consequence of this orientation is a personality which emphasizes rational discipline and control of the self and tries to change, dominate, and transform the world. According to Weber, asceticism is compatible with a rational organization of behavior in methodic and disciplined terms, and tends towards economic development, capitalist expansion, and industrialization.

Mysticism, on the other hand, is assumed by Weber to lead to the exact opposite implications. In mysticism, God is immanent in the world so that nature and God become identical realities. Because of the immanent character of the divine reality, God can be experienced by the individual believer. The believer conceives of himself as the vessel of God and becomes filled with ecstasy of divine love and overwhelmed by experiential and emotional trances. The goal of life, therefore, is not to change the world but to attain unity and harmony with it. The dominant orientation of the believer is one of harmony with nature and not one of conquest and transformation. For Weber, this implied that mysticism is incompatible with economic rationalization and development. viii

Together with his other distinctions--like those of this-worldly and other-worldly orientations--Weber classifies world religions and examines their implications for economic rationalization. It was in this context that he found one of the roots of the development of capitalism in Protestantism. In this paper we are not concerned with the details of Weber's theory. However, Weber's theory can be easily reoriented towards the question of preservation of the environment as well. Following the same logic one can conclude that while asceticism is incompatible with protection of the environment, mysticism corresponds with an attitude of preservation of nature. In summary one can say that in Weber's theory, asceticism leads to economic development but destruction of the environment whereas mysticism ends in economic stagnation but protection of the environment.

Despite the creative insights of Weber's theory, his typology of religious meaning systems is incomplete. In fact both asceticism and mysticism are capable of opposite implications. This can be seen clearly in Bahá'í theology, which fits neither of the models defined by Weber's typology. Bahá'í theology can be termed the perspective of harmonious transcendence. This position is radically different from both Weberian mysticism and the perspective of the transcendence of opposition (Weber's "asceticism"). However, this means that

the thesis of the transcendence of God can have implications different from those proposed by Weber's concept of asceticism.

According to the Bahá'í teachings, God is an absolutely transcendental reality. However, instead of opposition, between the divine and the natural realms there is harmony. This implies that the Bahá'í position conforms neither to the mysticism nor the asceticism of the Weberian model. It can be argued, therefore, that while the doctrine of the transcendence of opposition (that God is outside of nature and opposed to it) may tend towards economic growth and destruction of nature, and while the doctrine of mysticism can be compatible with a stagnant economy and protection of the environment, the principle of harmonious transcendence is compatible with both respect for nature and the motivation for progress and development. However, this also implies a radically different definition of development, one which is conceptualized in the context of respect for the environment and for future generations.

In order to understand the Bahá'í orientation to nature we must consider the central theological doctrine of the Bahá'í Faith, the concept of manifestation and revelation. According to this concept, God is an absolutely unknowable essence who is utterly beyond the comprehension of human beings. At the same time, in the Bahá'í teachings the purpose and meaning of the human being is recognition, love, and worship of God. These two propositions may initially seem to be contradictory. However, this paradox is resolved by the concept of manifestation. Although divine reality in its essence cannot be understood by the human mind, humans can recognize the manifestations of God at the level of the created realm. The Manifestations of God are like mirrors which reflect divine attributes at the level of creation. Therefore, recognition of the manifestations of God becomes the synthesis of the paradox of the human situation. This means that for Bahá'ís the realm of the sacred that is accessible to humans is nothing but the realm of the manifestations of God. Recognition, love, and worship of the divine manifestations equates to the recognition, love, and worship of God.

We already have explicated the essential components of the Bahá'í theology of revelation. The Manifestations reveal the divine reality in the realm of creation in accordance with the structural potentialities of created beings. However, for Bahá'ís all of created reality is the realm of manifestation. The very reality of all beings is nothing but a reflection of the divine and revelation of the signs of God. Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory!

Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness: and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. ix

This means that nature is the mirror of God which should be recognized and loved as the reflection and embodiment of divine revelation. The traditional opposition between the invisible and the visible realms is now replaced by the Bahá'í conception of the harmony of the divine and the created realms.

Abdu'l-Bahá explicates the same principle in the following way:

These are spiritual truths relating to the spiritual world. In like manner, from these spiritual realities infer truths about the material world. For physical things are signs and imprints of spiritual things; every lower thing is an image and counterpart of a higher thing. Nay, earthly and heavenly, material and spiritual, accidental and essential, particular and universal, structure and foundation, appearance and reality and the essence of all things, both inward and outward—all of these are connected one with another and are interrelated in such a manner that you will find that drops are patterned after seas, and that atoms are structured after suns in proportion to their capacities and potentialities. For particulars in relation to what is below them are universals, and what are great universals in the sight of those whose eyes are veiled are in fact particulars in relation to the realities and beings which are superior to them. Universal and particular are in reality incidental and relative considerations. The mercy of thy Lord, verily, encompasseth all things! (provisional translation)<sup>x</sup>

If humans view the realm of nature as the symbol and mirror of divine attributes, then their attitude towards the environment will not be one of abuse and destruction. The Bahá'í theology of revelation simultaneously affirms the two principles of the absolute transcendence of God and the sacred character of nature. That is why the Bahá'í position fits neither mysticism nor asceticism as defined by Weberian typology. Mysticism and asceticism are both (partially) affirmed and (partially) negated in the Bahá'í worldview and hence the Bahá'í value orientation is neither a destructive instrumental rationalization, nor a stagnant conception of life and culture

which ignores the natural potentiality of human beings for cultural advancement and development. On the contrary, it harmonizes the imperatives of development and protection of the environment. It is no wonder, then, that all the Bahá'í writings dealing with socioeconomic development and rationalization call for a redefinition of the concepts of reason and progress through a multidimensional expansion of both ideas. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Secret of Divine Civilization* is precisely an elaboration of this central idea.<sup>xi</sup>

# B. The Principle of the Harmony of Nature and Culture

While the doctrine of manifestation explained the Bahá'í conception of the relation of God to nature, the same doctrine informs the Bahá'í view of the relation between culture and nature. In fact this harmony is a fundamental principle of Bahá'í ontology. The first expression of this principle can be found in the idea of manifestation itself. According to the Bahá'í writings, the divine reality is revealed through two fundamental types of manifestation. The first represents the realm of spiritual culture and civilization. This is the realm of divine revelation through the prophets and messengers of God who initiated successive stages of spiritual culture and civilization and whose teachings represent the highest potentialities of spiritual perfection for humanity in their particular historical age. They are called the *Manifestations* of God because they represent the purest reflection of the divine reality at the level of the created realm in a given socio-historical stage of cultural development of humanity. The differences between these Manifestations is only due to the changing forms of the appearance of divine revelation in accordance with the changing conditions of human cultural development. Like the sun, they appear from different horizons, but their reality is one and the same. In other words, these Manifestations of God represent an essential spiritual unity in the midst of historical diversity of revelations.

But in addition to this cultural reflection of divine revelation, the Bahá'í teachings recognize the reality of another primary reflection of the Divine Will, which is the manifestation of God at the level of natural reality. Nature and culture are thus two fundamental modes of the reflection of the divine Will in the created realm. This means that both nature and historically specific spiritual civilizations are two different expressions of the same reality. It is again the fundamental principle of unity in diversity which is the supreme category of Bahá'í ontology. In the Tablet of Wisdom, Bahá'u'lláh explains this philosophical and theological principle:

Say: Nature in its essence is the embodiment of My Name, the Maker, the Creator. Its manifestations are diversified by varying causes, and in this diversity there are signs for men of discernment, Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world. It is a dispensation of Providence ordained by the Ordainer, the All-Wise. Were anyone to affirm that it is the Will of God as manifested in the world of being, no one should question this assertion. xii

The harmony and unity of nature and culture is discussed in the Bahá'í writings in various terms. One of these is the distinction between "áfáq" and "anfus," two terms first mentioned in the Qur'án. The Bahá'í writings frequently use these categories to designate the natural (áfáq) and human (anfus) realities. Referring to the Qur'ánic statement, the Bahá'í writings frequently speak of both realms of nature and culture as a "book" which should be read, interpreted, and understood:

Look at the world and ponder a while upon it. It unveileth the book of its own self before thine eyes and revealeth that which the Pen of thy Lord, the Fashioner, the All-Informed, hath inscribed therein. It will acquaint thee with that which is within it and upon it and will give thee such clear explanations as to make thee independent of every eloquent expounder. xiii

Compared to the materialistic, mechanistic, and positivistic models, the Bahá'í model represents a radically different approach to both nature and culture. First of all, this recurring metaphor implies a hermeneutical approach to both social and natural reality: reality in all its forms becomes a text which should be read and interpreted. The empirical appearance of both nature and culture does not exhaust their complex reality. Both nature and culture are symbols which refer to something beyond themselves. It is that transcendental reference which constitutes the ultimate reality and meaning of natural and cultural life.

But the metaphor of book as the description of nature and culture has other important implications. One is the form of the relation of humans to their natural environment. In a behavioristic and mechanistic model, the relation of humans to nature takes the form of a monologue. Humans treat nature as simply the "condition" of their interest in maximization of utility, and never engage in a dialogue with nature as something more than a means of fulfilling their selfish desires. That is why the normal attitude towards nature can be one of domination and

insensitivity. However, in the Bahá'í conception of nature as a meaningful divine book, the relation of humans with nature is one of dialogue and interaction. Just as the human relation to one's self is the relation of the reader with a text, one's relation to nature must also follow the same logic. Both nature and culture are embodiments of divine truth and should be treated as such.

Another reflection of the principle of the harmony of nature and culture can be found in the frequent parallelism drawn between the realm of cosmic creation (takvín) on the one hand, and the realm of legislation (Tashri') or spiritual creation (tadvín), on the other. The level of cosmic creation refers to the totality of the natural world, while the level of the spiritual creation, or legislation, refers to the spiritual teachings of the historical Manifestations of God in the form of the different revealed religions. Both, however, are the product of the same creative divine action, which is the Will of God. This Divine Will is the ultimate reality of both creation and revelation. The principle of the harmony and parallelism of the two realms of creation and revelation is frequently affirmed in the writings of the Báb.

It is partly due to this underlying principle that the writings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh sometimes use a language of numerical symbolism to express various spiritual principles. The equivalence of letters with numbers in Arabic allows a particularly easy interchange of numbers and concepts. The writings of the Báb are filled with this symbolic language. For instance, the word Báb, which means gate, is equivalent of number 5 (B=2, A=1). Similarly, the word nár, meaning fire, is equivalent to 251 (N=50, A=1, R=200) while the word nár, meaning light, is equal to 256 (N=50, U=6, R=200). Using the numerical values of these three concepts, the Báb frequently makes an important spiritual assertion: that he himself, or the Báb, is the difference, and therefore the gate, between "fire" and "light." Whoever believes in him is liberated from spiritual hell (symbolized by fire) and becomes an inmate of spiritual heaven (symbolized by light). The difference between the two words is 5 which is the same as the numerical value of the word Báb. In other words, the Báb has reinterpreted the notions of hell and heaven: hell is the state of deprivation from recognition of the Manifestation of God, whereas heaven or paradise is the state of recognition, love, and worship of God through his Manifestation.

What is crucial here is understanding the profound philosophical presupposition and implication of this usage. Here, in contrast to the magical and superstitious usage of numerology in premodern worldviews, in the Bahá'í worldview the language of numbers becomes the vehicle and symbolic expression of the principle of the harmony of nature and culture, or creation and revelation. Failing to recognize this fundamental meaning and presupposition of Bahá'í

philosophy will lead to a reduction of the Bahá'í Faith to philosophies which are essentially foreign to its worldview. In other words, in the Bahá'í teachings numbers by themselves have no intrinsic significance. They become significant only as symbolic vehicles that mediate between the natural and cultural realms.

The principle of the harmony of culture and nature is affirmed in the Bahá'í writings in many other ways as well. One of these is the Bahá'í view of all beings as endowed, in their own degree, with a spirit or "soul" (nafs). 'Abdu'l-Bahá made frequent reference to different types of soul. Unlike most Islamic philosophers who confined the notion of soul to the nonmineral realm, 'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently talks about the mineral soul (nafs-i-jamádí). At the same time He makes it clear that there exists a hierarchy of the reflection of consciousness in different kingdoms or levels of creation. While the mineral is also endowed with "soul," the expression of this spiritual essence at that level of reality takes the form of the power of attraction and repulsion. Attraction and repulsion are elementary qualities of spirit, and minerals insofar as they possess them possess soul or spirit to that elementary degree. However, identifying both human and natural reality as diverse expressions of the same spiritual principle affirms the same notion of harmony and interconnectedness of all beings.

Finally, another reflection of the same principle can be found in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's definition of nature as the "essential connections proceeding from the realities of things." However, what is notable is that 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the exact same words to define three different phenomena. These are religion (sharí'at), knowledge ('ilm), and love (mahabbat). The use of identical definitions for nature, religion, knowledge, and love is an indication of many complex and profound insights. However, already we can observe one clear meaning with respect to the Bahá'í conception of reality, culture, and nature: love and knowledge are both creative cosmic principles and positive attributes of human beings. Nature and religion are both different modes of the reflection of the same spiritual reality. They are both embodiments of love and knowledge, and the means for the development and discovery of the capacity for love and knowledge in the human reality.

C. Universal Nature and Human Nature: Harmony, Conflict, and Transcendence

In the preceding section the Bahá'í principle of the harmony of nature and culture was emphasized. Another important element of the Bahá'í approach to the question of the environment concerns the relation of human nature to the natural world, and the dynamics of

natural law. One of the implications of the mechanistic and materialistic definition of nature and culture is the hedonistic idea of freedom. According to this doctrine, all natural beings follow their natural tendencies and act in accordance with their nature. Therefore, the theory adds, humans should also act in accordance with the laws of nature and their naturalistic desire for gain and acquisition. This theory has been sometimes combined with a version of Social Darwinism, according to which both nature and culture are organized on the basis of the principles of the struggle for existence and the survival of the fittest. Humans are thought to fulfill their nature by following their natural desires. Liberty to follow one's own selfish interests, therefore, becomes an affirmation of human nature.

In the Bahá'í writings we can detect at least three fundamental principles concerning the relation of human nature to universal nature. The first principle regards the nature of reality. According to the Bahá'í writings, the ultimate law of reality is not struggle for existence but cooperation, mutual reciprocity, and harmonious interdependence. The metaphysical expression of this idea is the principle of unity in diversity. Reality is perceived in terms of three levels of being corresponding to three forms of unity in diversity. These three levels are the realm of the transcendental God, the realm of the Divine Will, and the realm of creation. All created beings are different expressions of the attributes of God. This is the supreme unity in diversity which connects all beings as mirrors of the divine. The unity in diversity of the Divine Will is represented by the common reality underlying the diverse forms of historical revelations and Manifestations of God as founders of different spiritual civilizations. The unity in diversity of the realm of creation is reflected in the category of natural reciprocity of all beings and the principle of oneness of humankind.

Because of this ultimate metaphysical unity in diversity of all beings the Bahá'í writings frequently talk of *love* as the organizing principle and essence of reality. All beings are reflections of divine love, and all are embodiments of love. That would seem to indicate one of the reasons 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave the same definition for nature and love. Consider this description of love in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's writings:

Love is the secret of God's holy Dispensation, the manifestation of the All-Merciful, the fountain of spiritual outpourings. Love is heaven's kindly light, the Holy Spirit's eternal breath that vivifies the human soul. Love is the cause of God's revelation unto man, the vital bond inherent, according to Divine creation, in the realities of things. Love is the one means that insures true felicity both in this world and the next. Love is the light that

guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God with man, that assureth the progress of every illumined soul. Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly Cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the diverse elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directs the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms. Love revealeth with unfailing and limitless power the mysteries latent in the universe. Love is the spirit of life unto the adorned body of mankind, the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world, and the shedder of imperishable glory upon every high-aiming race and nation. \*\*v

But aside from the Bahá'í metaphysical standpoint, the Bahá'í writings are filled with emphasis on the empirical reality of the principle of cosmic reciprocity, interdependence, and unity. 'Abdu'l-Bahá frequently and directly criticized the materialistic interpretation of Darwinism which legitimized war, domination, and conflict against nature and other humans. Emphasizing the organic character of cosmic reality He wrote:

... even as the human body in this world, which is outwardly composed of different limbs and organs, is in reality a closely integrated, coherent entity, similarly the structure of the physical world is like unto a single being whose limbs and members are inseparably linked together.

Were one to observe with an eye that discovereth the realities of all things, it would become clear that the greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, and that co-operation, mutual aid, and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly... Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness. xvi

The second principle concerning the relation of human nature and universal nature relates to the fact that although the overall structural principle of reality is one of harmony and interdependence, there also exists some degree of conflict and struggle for existence at the level of observable empirical natural species. Thus while the Bahá'í teachings deny the reduction of

reality to a logic of conflict and war, they recognize the existence of struggle for existence as a biological law. However, this conflict and struggle is organized in such a way that the overall result is ecological harmony, reciprocity, equilibrium, and the sustaining of life on the planet earth. In other words, the expression of universal nature in all species leads to an overall equilibrium and reciprocity. Even the struggle for existence, as a natural expression of biological interest in survival, is a means of creating this overall reciprocity, harmony, and equilibrium. Death is an organic part of life which is oriented to reproduction and sustaining of life.

But the apparent paradox of the preceding two principles leads us to the third. This principle relates to the unique nature of human beings and its relation to universal nature. If we apply the previous idea--that all beings follow their nature and the result is ecological equilibrium--to human reality, we confront major paradoxes. If humans also followed the rule of struggle for existence and survival of the fittest, the result would be ecological catastrophe and destruction of life on the planet. The reason for this paradox is the unique natural ability of humans for rationality, science, and technological advancement. Humans can, through their very nature, transcend the empirical natural limits of their physical existence and make themselves partly autonomous from their immediate environment and natural laws. Through the development of scientific and technological power humanity can alter the natural ecological balance of the planet, destroy other species, reduce biological and ecological diversity with dangerous speed, pollute the resources of the world, and destroy the very natural environment of which he is a part. The ultimate result is the destruction of both human life and ecological equilibrium. Reactions to this paradox have ranged from a call to suppress the human natural propensity for rational development of science and technology--a regressive logic--to a denial of the reality of the dangers confronting the environment.

Obviously both of these responses are inadequate. Human nature has the right to be expressed, and the progressive destruction of environment is an objective reality. It is in this context that the third Bahá'í principle becomes relevant. According to the Bahá'í writings the authentic nature of human beings is qualitatively different from the empirical expression of nature at the level of different animal species. In its totality human nature is characterized by multidimensional needs and potentialities—but it does not reduce to the materialistic and Social Darwinistic bundle of selfish desires and instrumental rationality. According to the Bahá'í teachings, human nature must be understood in terms of both its material and spiritual potentialities. Human beings are only fully human when they are experiencing the self-actualization of their highest potentialities. This means that both technological development and

moral/spiritual advancement, instrumental rationalization and practical rationalization, material civilization and spiritual culture, science and religion must progress in an harmonious and reciprocal manner. The consequence is both the restraint of human selfish desires and a conscious orientation towards altruism and solidarity with all beings. In other words, spiritual and moral culture must play the role of human instincts. The result is that humans, by following their authentic nature, will in fact contribute to the sustaining of life on the planet and to the ecological balance of the environment.

This implies that the need for revelation, spiritual education, and self-discipline is in fact part of universal nature. But this also means that the true expression of universal nature at the human level cannot be reduced to the logic of instinctual self-orientation and the consequent struggle for existence. While the law of struggle for existence and the rule of instinct is a means of maintaining ecological balance at the level of other natural beings, human nature cannot be defined in the same terms. That is why the writings of the Bahá'í Faith reject the moral reduction of humans to the realm of material nature and selfish instincts. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

From the time of the creation of Adam to this day there have been two pathways in the world of humanity; one the natural or materialistic, the other religious or spiritual. The pathway of nature is the pathway of the animal realm. The animal acts in accordance with the requirements of nature, follows its own instincts and desires... One of the strangest things witnessed is that the materialists of today are proud of their natural instincts and bondage. They state that nothing is entitled to belief and acceptance except that which is sensible or tangible. By their own statements they are captives of nature, unconscious of the spiritual world... Consider how all other phenomenal existence and beings are captives of nature... Man makes nature his servant; harness the mighty energy of electricity for instance and imprisons it in a small lamp for his use and convenience... Though he is a dweller upon earth he penetrates the mysteries of starry worlds inconceivably distant... The second pathway is that of religion, the road of the divine Kingdom. It involves the acquisition of praiseworthy attributes, heavenly illumination and righteous actions in the world of humanity. \*\*vii\*\*

Thus the Bahá'í writings on the one hand refer to nature as the mirror of divine reality and on the other hand call for human transcendence of the realm of biological nature. In fact, there is no contradiction involved here. That same human power to transcend the realm of natural

necessity is itself the particular reflection of nature as a divine reality at the level of human beings. The sacredness of nature requires a rejection of the mechanistic logic of reducing human action to material and selfish nature. 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that while human obsession with animalistic impulses constitutes evil, there is nothing evil in an animal's pursuit of its natural inclinations: "All sin comes from the demands of nature, and these demands which arise from the physical qualities, are not sins with respect to the animals, while for man they are sin."

It is obvious from these three principles that human beings, characterized by self-consciousness and the ability for cultural and scientific development, have a unique potentiality and mission with respect to the natural environment. This affirmation of their higher station and potentiality does not imply the justification of domination and destruction of other species but precisely the opposite: As the embodiment of all divine attributes and endowed with higher potentialities, human beings must realize those potentialities, become progressively more caring, altruistic, and spiritual, and attain a higher degree of unity and harmony with all beings. That the human being is the "image" of God is no less than a call for human care and responsibility towards all creatures. It is in fact only when we recognize the reality of human transcendence from empirical nature that we can discover the ability and the mission of human beings to protect the environment. In contrast, the denial of human uniqueness can easily turn into a materialistic definition of human nature which legitimizes domination and destruction of both nature and culture.

It is for this reason that Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas has criticized the hedonistic conception of freedom, arguing that authentic human freedom is inseparable from human commitment to spiritual and cultural values and principles. He affirms: "We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others. We verily, are the All-Knowing. Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of certainty, attain unto perfect liberty." xix

We can conclude that the Bahá'í thesis of the transcendental character of human nature is another expression of the principle of the harmony of nature and culture. That is also compatible with the fact that in the Bahá'í writings for the first time a truly "organic" conception of nature and culture has been suggested. Although, as mentioned earlier, the premodern conceptions of nature and culture were also organic, they were in fact only partially organic. The premodern view emphasized the interconnectedness of all beings but lacked a historical and

dynamic consciousness. Life in its natural and cultural form was defined in terms of ahistorical circles of proportion and a static conception of being. A truly organic being, however, is characterized by life, interdependence of parts, and growth and development. The last element was only a residual and secondary element in the traditional worldview.

The Bahá'í writings affirm not only the principle of unity and interconnectedness of all beings but also emphasize a historical consciousness. \*\*x\* In fact 'Abdu'l-Bahá has used his definition of religion, as the essential connections proceeding from the realities of things, to advocate the necessity of progressive revelation and to affirm the dynamics of social and cultural advancement. The religions of God correspond to the necessary relations arising from the nature of things. But since humanity is an organic and dynamic reality, to contribute to the everadvancing march of human civilization, these necessary connections require changing the social laws of religion. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "The Manifestations--that is, the Holy Lawgiver--unless He is aware of the realities of beings, will not comprehend the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things, and He will certainly not be able to establish a religion conformable to the facts and suited to the conditions." \*\*xxi\*

Similarly, Bahá'u'lláh uses an organic metaphor to explain the necessity of adopting a global spiritual orientation for solving the problems of humanity at this stage of its development:

Regard the world as the human body which, though at its creation whole and perfect, hath been afflicted, through various causes, with grave disorders and maladies. Not for one day did it gain ease, nay its sickness waxed more severe, as it fell under the treatment of ignorant physicians, who gave full rein to their personal desires, and have erred grievously... That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith. This can in no wise be achieved except through the power of a skilled, an all-powerful, and inspired Physician. xxiii

This conception implies that both the principle of the interconnectedness of all beings and the principle of human spiritual transcendence are affirmed and united in the Bahá'í worldview; thus the Bahá'í point of view is neither mechanistic nor static. It is neither a flight from rationality nor the reification of a one-sided, destructive, and instrumental rationalization; rather, it harmonizes material and spiritual cultures in the context of a spiritual, global, and progressive orientation.

#### 3. Social Contract and Covenant

In order to understand the Bahá'í position on the question of the environment, we need to examine another central doctrine of the Bahá'í Faith, the principle of the covenant. One of the achievements of modernity has been the notion of social contract and the democratic approach to society and politics. The Enlightenment idea of social contract has been extremely influential in the self-consciousness of modern humanity, acting as the central organizing principle of modern economic, political, and cultural life in many parts of the world. However, the concept of social contract, although certainly a positive moral and political principle, has fundamental limitations and inadequacies. The choice between the current narrow definition of social contract and the complex notion of covenant has a fundamental impact on the attitude toward and treatment of nature.

Although an exposition of the limitations of the idea of social contract is beyond the scope of this paper, I will briefly review some of the major problems in this concept.

- 1) The first problem is that not all contracts guarantee justice. In situations of the difference of power, resources, and information, for example, a contract might seem egalitarian and consensual but in fact it may not be so. Another expression of the same problem is that social contract is based upon a selfish and instrumental approach to social order. It implies that the commitment to the social contract can only be maintained on the basis of the fear of punishment.
- 2) The second problem relates to the nature of the actual partners in the social contract. From the very beginning, both the philosophy of the Enlightenment and nineteenth-century liberalism excluded certain categories of people from the social contract. Women and the poor are just two common examples.
- 3) The other limitation of the idea of social contract is the fact that it is confined to living humans. The conservative and Romantic criticism of the doctrine of social contract centered on this issue. Burke argued that a binding social contract should also take into account past generations as well. In that case the doctrine of social contract, when applied to the present and the past, becomes compatible with respect for tradition. \*\*xiii\* However, the more fundamental problem with the doctrine of social contract is in the opposite direction: it does not include future human beings. The result is that the hedonistic consensus of the present generation can destroy the environment for the next generation. Such a limited concept of social contract is of course inadequate.

- 4) Another structural problem of the social contract is related to the nationalistic presuppositions of the doctrine. In other words, the social contract is confined to the borders of a nation-state, and does not include all living human beings in the present. The category of citizenship is the exclusion factor in this social contract, so that as long as a policy is acceptable to the citizens of a particular country, regardless of the needs and interests of other human beings, the policy is conceived as just and democratic. The problem with this commonly accepted premise is that the institution of citizenship is the most important basis of social inequality for human beings at present. Citizenship, and not class position, ethnicity, or gender, is the most powerful and effective predictor of the life chances of a person in our current world. Aside from the fundamental injustice and hypocrisy of nationalistic exclusions, it remains a fact that the nationalistic construction and definition of social contract is one of the most important causes of environmental waste and degradation. As long as the interests of a limited part of the world can be secured at the expense of the interests of other parts of the world, environmental destruction in the form of internal consumption and export of the environmental costs to other parts of the world will remain the guiding principle of policy making, resulting in both environmental destruction and social injustice.
- 5) Finally, the modern conception of social contract does not include all natural beings but is confined to a small number of the human species. But such a social contract which can reduce the realm of nature to a mere conditional factor for the gratification of human desires is fundamentally opposed to the imperative of global solidarity and harmony.

In contrast, the principle of the covenant is the central organizing principle of social and cultural life of the Bahá'í worldview. The concept of covenant has been emphasized in all the divine revelations, but in the Bahá'í teachings that concept has been further developed and refined. The idea of covenant is in fact the same as the social contract but without the limitations and exclusions of that concept. Human life, including human social and cultural life, is understood as a relation and interaction with the totality of reality. The notion of covenant affirms human relation, commitment, responsibility, and love for the totality of beings and not a small number of the members of one's own group. It is in this context that the question of the covenant includes the democratic ideal, but in the context of cosmic solidarity and reciprocity. The idea of covenant makes human life a meaningful event in a meaningful universe. It is an affirmation of both the spiritual and transcendental reality of human being and the spiritual connection and interdependence of all beings. Needless to say, the implication of such an idea in terms of our discussion is both social justice and preservation of the environment.

More specifically, the Bahá'í concept of covenant is both an eternal and an historical principle. It is eternal because the essential reality of humanity is in fact its relation and orientation to the Divine Will. In other words, the essence of the human being is the dialogue and covenant with and commitment to God. This covenant, therefore, constitutes the very core of human existence and is a transhistorical principle. In metaphorical language, this is affirmed by the Qur'ánic story according to which in the world of archetypes, prior to the empirical creation, God gathered all human beings and asked them "am I not your Lord?," to which they answered affirmatively. At the same time, for Bahá'ís this same principle is also a historical one. Humans are historical beings and therefore the particular form of dialogue between humanity and God takes creative new forms. That is why divine revelations are progressive and without any end. But this covenant becomes qualitatively different from the restrictive idea of social contract. Let us compare the principle of covenant with the idea of social contract and see how it addresses the limitations of the materialistic theory.

- 1) Covenant involves all human beings and therefore it entails the seed of the democratic principle. However, it involves active relation with God as well. This new dimension immediately differentiates the principle of covenant from social contract theory. First, since the social contract is now accompanied by a spiritual and normative commitment, the attitudes of the partners to the social contract radically change. We saw that contract by itself may not be just because it may be oriented to the particularistic and selfish interests of the dominant partner. However, with the addition of the normative and spiritual principle, the attitude of the partners becomes one of devotion, love, universal orientation, and willingness to sacrifice. The covenant, therefore is the unity of rationality and morality in a contractual pact. It is this factor which protects this social contract against turning into a tool of subtle oppression. Such a principle is also opposed to extremes of wealth and poverty. In other words, the Bahá'í social contract assumes both the moderation of economic inequalities, and the spiritual and moral values of the participants. Another important consequence of this covenant is that coercion is not the sole basis of order. In a purely instrumental understanding of the social contract, people obey the laws only because of the fear of punishment. But the combination of a democratic social contract and normative, spiritual, and universalistic orientation on the part of the people radically alters the situation.
- 2) Unlike the eighteenth and nineteenth century expressions of the idea of social contract, the concept of covenant does not exclude any human beings. It implies the inherent dignity and rights of all human beings without exception. In fact the democratic ideals of the

Enlightenment philosophy and its concept of natural human rights are rooted in this spiritual principle. Denying the principle of covenant leaves the democratic or egalitarian principles devoid of any substantive real basis and justification. Hegel was right when he argued that the very idea of human equality, emphasized by the Enlightenment philosophy, was the product of divine revelation. He mentioned that the spiritual conception of humans as the children and image of God endowed with a divine soul has created the condition of the possibility of the emergence of democratic ideas.

At the same time the principle of covenant is a historical category. This means that the empirical expression of the eternal dignity of humans in the realm of history depends on the level of spiritual and cultural development and the conditions of space and time. In other words, the social teachings of the former revelations were limited by the historical limitations of the time. Therefore, the egalitarian essence of the eternal concept of covenant was realized in a gradual manner in different revelations. According to the Bahá'í teachings, we are now living in an unprecedented stage of human development in which for the first time the eternal egalitarian essence of the covenant can be expressed in egalitarian social laws as well. The Bahá'í Faith, as the embodiment of this new form of divine revelation and covenant, is based upon the fundamental premise of the oneness of humanity. It is the realization and fulfillment of democratic principles in the context of a spiritual definition of human existence.

3) The other differentiating feature of the principle of covenant is that, unlike the doctrine of social contract, the principle of the covenant includes not only living humans but past and future generations as well. This is a crucial difference. With the inclusion of the past we no longer treat past cultures and societies simply as superstitious and ignorant. Instead of taking a position of arrogance and distinction, the attitude becomes one of continuity and humility. But more important than the inclusion of the past is the inclusion of the future. The key to the protection of the environment is precisely this feature of the covenant. If social contracts take into consideration the attitudes and needs of future generations, then they cannot adopt policies which are detrimental to the environment. Moral and spiritual commitment to humanity as such, including future generations, requires the adoption of sustainable patterns of development, production, and consumption. That is why the principle of the dignity and oneness of humanity is the most frequently emphasized idea in the Bahá'í Faith. It provides an orientation which is not only humanitarian but also protective of the environment. That is exactly the message of the principle of the covenant, implying a sacred duty of all humans towards all beings. In a purely instrumental conception of democracy, a policy is just and good if it protects and advances the

interests of the partners to the contract. All else is conditional and not intrinsically binding. Of course we can imagine the possibility of a revision of the idea of social contract which would also involve future human generations. But that lofty idea is already the principle of covenant.

4) The principle of the covenant is fundamentally opposed to the nationalistic exclusions of modern social contracts. In fact the restriction of social contract to national citizens is contrary to any idea of human rights. The destruction of the environment is an inevitable consequence of the competition of nation states in their pursuit of maximization of wealth and consumption at the expense of other countries. It is for these reasons that Bahá'u'lláh called for the oneness of humanity and advocated the need for moral, cultural, and structural changes in the organization of human life. His model is one of unity in diversity in which both local initiatives and global solidarity and unity complement national structures. The resources of the world should be accessible to all humanity regardless of their birthplace, and humanity must adopt a global orientation for solving its problems. No military solution is adequate for the environmental dangers threatening the life of all beings on this planet. It is time to develop a global orientation corresponding to the inherent unity of all humans. It is only after all humanity considers this fragile planet as their home that cooperative solutions to the environmental problems become possible. Bahá'u'lláh affirmed this principle when he declared: "the world is but one country and mankind its citizens." Similarly Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, insisted on both the moral and structural implications of the Bahá'í concept of the unity of humankind. He wrote:

Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind--the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve--is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations... Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all states and nations as members of one human family.... It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world--a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units. \*xxiv\*

5) Finally, the principle of the covenant, unlike the idea of social contract, is a covenant of humanity with all reality. It means that the entire realm of divine revelation is included in the essential covenant of humanity with God. Nature, therefore, is part of the covenant which connects humanity to itself, to God, and to totality of being. It is partly for this reason that the Bahá'í writings have also affirmed the concept of microcosm and macrocosm. It is again for the same reason that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá have stated that reality is one and that "the whole is in the part and the part is in the whole." This is, of course, an imperative for the protection of the environment.

One of the expressions of this new approach to natural reality is Bahá'í concept of paradise. The Bahá'í teachings do not consider paradise as a space, right, or reward of human beings alone. On the contrary, paradise is ultimately defined as the state of perfection and actualization of the potentialities of being. This means that all beings have their own paradise. Human paradise is just one of the heavens of reality. In other words, all natural beings have a moral "right" to realize their paradise, and that paradise is their state of perfection and actualization. Human beings, through their unique capacities, have a moral responsibility towards all natural beings. It is a moral imperative for human beings to provide the possibility of the realization of paradise for all beings. This is not only a logical consequence of Bahá'í theology and its doctrine of a totality-oriented covenant, but also an explicit commandment in its own right. The implication of this principle is truly far reaching. The idea of paradise as the perfection of each being, and human responsibility in that regard, is frequently discussed in the writings. For instance, in the Persian Bayán, the Báb writes: "No created thing shall ever attain its paradise unless it appeareth in its highest degree of perfection. For instance, this crystal representeth the paradise of the stone whereof its substance is composed. Likewise there are stages in the paradise for the crystal itself... Man's highest station, however, is attained through faith in God in every Dispensation and by acceptance of what hath been revealed by Him." xxv

More specifically, in the Bahá'í concept of covenant a social order must be a unity of democracy and spiritual values. The democratic principle is supported by the Bahá'í teachings but with two additional requirements: First, the social contract must involve all human beings as members of one organic family. Secondly, in this process of global consultation, certain guiding principles and values must be incorporated, chief among which is respect for the interests of the future generations, the protection of nature, and the spiritual advancement of humanity. Such a model is spiritual, global, and progressive.

Let us finish our discussion by quoting one of the statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá concerning the emergence of the Day of Resurrection and heaven:

This period of time is the Promised Age, the assembling of the human race to the "Resurrection Day" and now is the great "Day of Judgment." Soon the whole world, as in springtime, will change its garb. The turning and falling of the autumn leaves is past; the bleakness of the winter time is over. The new year hath appeared and the spiritual springtime is at hand. The black earth is becoming a verdant garden; the deserts and mountains are teeming with red flowers; from the borders of the wilderness the tall grasses are standing like advance guards before the cypress and jessamine trees; while the birds are singing among the rose branches like the angels in the highest heavens, announcing the glad-tidings of the approach of the spiritual spring, and the sweet music of their voices is causing the real essence of all things to move and quiver. \*\*xxvi\*\*

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>i</sup> Foucault, Michel, The Order of Things (New York, Vintage, 1973)

ii Levi-Bruhl, Lucien, L'ame primitive (Alcan, Quadrige, 1927)

iii Levi-Strauss, Claude, The Savage Mind (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1966)

iv Cassirer, Ernst, An Essay on Man (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1944) pp. 72-109.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>v</sup> See , L'Idee de nature en France dans la seconde moitie du XVIIe siecle (Paris, Klincksieck, 1978)

vi Descartes, Rene, Discourse on Method, and Meditations (New York, Liberal Arts Press, 1976)

vii See Holbach, Baron d', System of Nature (Boston, Mendum, 1877)

viii Weber, Max, Sociology of Religion (Boston, Beacon Press, 1963)

ix Bahá'u'lláh, Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1987) p. 272.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>x</sup> Provisional translation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablet of Aflák í yyih by an individual.

xi 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1957)

xii Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing trust, 1978) p. 142.

xiii Ibid, pp. 141-42.

xiv For more examples, see Saiedi, Nader, Logos and Civilization (Bethesda, University Press of Maryland, 2000)

xv The Divine Art of Living (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1944) pp.108-109

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>xvi</sup> Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations (Maryborough, Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) p. 71.

xvii Bahá'í World Faith (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1943) PP. 235-37.

xviii 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) P. 119.

xix Bahá'u'lláh, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1992) pp. 62-63.

xx See Logos and Civilization.

xxi 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions, p. 158.

xxii Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1952) pp. 254-55

xxiii Burke, Edmund, Reflections on the Revolution in France (Indianapolis, Hackett, 1987)

xxiv Shoghi Effendi, World Order of Bahá'u'lláh (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1938) pp. 42-43.

xxv The Báb, Selections from the Writings of the Báb (Haifa, Bahá'í World Center, 1976) pp. 88-89.

xxvi 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1956) p. 352.