

Scientific and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change

Unit 1

Spiritual Reflections on Nature and Humankind

*The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.*¹

The Bible

*A drop of the billowing ocean of His endless mercy hath adorned all creation with the ornament of existence, and a breath wafted from His peerless Paradise hath invested all beings with the robe of His sanctity and glory. A sprinkling from the unfathomed deep of His sovereign and all-pervasive Will hath, out of utter nothingness, called into being a creation which is infinite in its range and deathless in its duration. The wonders of His bounty can never cease, and the stream of His merciful grace can never be arrested. The process of His creation hath had no beginning, and can have no end.*²

Bahá'u'lláh

Section 1: Nature and Creation

The word nature describes our material (physical) world, the word creation applies both to the spiritual and to the material world. You can find statements about nature and creation in the sacred Writings of the world's religions:

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men.*³

*You are worthy, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honour and power, for you created all things, and by your will they were created and have their being.*⁴

Christianity

*Who created the waters and the plants? Who yoked the swiftness of the winds and the motion to the clouds? For I beheld Ahura Mazda (Wise Lord) as the primeval source of creation.*⁵

Zoroastrianism

*When God created the first human beings, God led them around all the trees of the Garden of Eden and said: "See my works, how beautiful and praiseworthy they are! Think of this, and do not corrupt or destroy My world."*⁶

Judaism

All praise to the unity of God, and all honor to Him, the sovereign Lord, the incomparable and all-glorious Ruler of the universe, Who, out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things, Who, from naught, hath

*brought into being the most refined and subtle elements of His creation, and Who, rescuing His creatures from the abasement of remoteness and the perils of ultimate extinction, hath received them into His kingdom of incorruptible glory. Nothing short of His all-encompassing grace, His all-pervading mercy, could have possibly achieved it. How could it, otherwise, have been possible for sheer nothingness to have acquired by itself the worthiness and capacity to emerge from its state of non-existence into the realm of being?*⁷

*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.*⁸

Bahá'í Faith

Section 2: Human Relationship with Nature

The Universal House of Justice, the global governing institution of the Bahá'í Faith pointed out that humanity's present relationship with nature is inadequate:

*... the principle of the oneness of humankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, asks not merely for cooperation among people and nations. It calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society. The deepening environmental crisis, driven by a system that condones the pillage of natural resources to satisfy an insatiable thirst for more, suggests how entirely inadequate is the present conception of humanity's relationship with nature; ...*⁹

One of the most prevalent debates surrounding climate change and many other environmental issues raises questions about the relationship between nature and humankind: Is man inherently different and separate from nature, or are we just another animal, one of many species embedded in the matrix of the physical world?

This question does generally not exist in Indigenous cultures because they view humans as an integral part of nature. That's why, Indigenous people live in a more harmonious relationship with nature, guided by principles of reciprocity and responsibility.

In Western culture, the dominant perspective is to view humans as separate from nature. This widespread perception is revealed by an examination of the word "environment" itself. The root of the French word "environ" means "around". The environment means the natural world around us. The word itself expresses a separateness between us humans and other creatures.

This view of separateness may have originated but was definitely reinforced by some interpretations of the following passage from the Bible: *"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."*¹⁰ Many Christians in the past, and some even today, interpret this passage as indicating that man is separate from nature and that it gives him license to exploit the planet and to justify actions that are harmful to other forms of life. However, many enlightened Christians today view this teaching as a command to be good stewards of the Earth. This interpretation of

“separateness” is often viewed by environmentalists as being at the “root” of our environmental crisis.¹¹

Some atheists, on the other hand, deny the sacred in both humans and nature and regard humans as animals that developed high intelligence as a successful evolutionary trait. They don't believe that humans are different in kind from other animals. This view has led to many different attitudes towards the environment, from intelligently protecting it (some argue that this is in our own interest), to indifference, to destroying it for selfish purposes without guilt.

Some people, including some environmentalists, hold a still different view: they deify nature itself and view human beings as being on the same plane of existence as animals and plants, and even as the Divine essence. This view is sometimes called “pantheism”. Bahá'u'lláh clearly corrects that view: *“He is really a believer in the Unity of God who recognizeth in each and every created thing the sign of the revelation of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, and not he who maintaineth that the creature is indistinguishable from the Creator.”*¹²

The Bahá'í view brings many seemingly opposing views together: As human beings we **physically** share our existence with the animals on this planet. We are part of nature, of the interconnected web of life. We share this view with many environmentalists. **Spiritually**, however, human beings are different from animals, as God created us with an immortal soul. The spiritual station of the human being allows us to differentiate between good and evil. Animals don't have this dilemma of choice. The human capacity of free will, to be able to consciously decide to do good or evil, comes with the great responsibility of moral action.

The Bahá'í International Community in its statement *One Planet One Habitation – a Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World* explains this beautifully:

*Human beings exercise a level of influence over the natural world unique among all forms of life on the planet. At times, this has been construed as justification for an orientation toward mastery and control of nature, buttressed by notions of ownership and dominance. As more and more people have come to recognize humanity's interconnection with and dependence on the environment, however, they have accepted that our unique impact carries with it the inescapable duty to nurture and protect the natural world.*¹³

A spiritually developed soul uses his/her capacities to live in harmony with God's creation and with his/her fellow human-beings.

Section 3: Interconnectedness and Interdependence in Nature

Religious Writings provide profound statements about the interconnectedness of nature:

*In the name of the merciful and compassionate God.
The Merciful taught the Koran;
He created man, taught him plain speech.
The sun and the moon have their appointed time;
The herbs and the trees adore;*

*And the heavens, He raised them and set the balance, that ye should not be outrageous in the balance;
But weigh ye aright, and stint not the balance.
And the earth He has set it for living creatures therein are fruits and palms, with sheaths; and grain with chaff and frequent shoots;
Then which of your Lord's bounties will ye twain deny.*¹⁴

Islam

*Reflect upon the inner realities of the universe, the secret wisdoms involved,...the inter-relationships, the rules that govern all. For every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance, nor any slackening whatever.*¹⁵

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.

... 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.

*Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. In other words, the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that cooperation 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.*¹⁶

Bahá'í Faith

The statement by the Bahá'í International Community *One Planet One Habitation – a Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World* begins with the following words:

*The natural world, in all its wonder and majesty, offers profound insight into the essence of interdependence. From the biosphere as a whole to the smallest microorganism, it demonstrates how dependent any one life-form is on numerous others—and how imbalances in one system reverberate across an interconnected whole.*¹⁷

In the seemingly infinite web of life everything is interconnected and interdependent.

We humans are part of the great web of life and therefore dependent upon its wholeness and integrity. We are as dependent as other living beings on the self-

renewing capacities of nature. However, our own actions increasingly threaten the integrity of this web of life.

Section 4: Sustainability

*All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.*¹⁸

Bahá'u'lláh

Environmental sustainability is the practice of preserving the web of life and not disrupting its balance. Sustainability can be defined as “*development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*”¹⁹

The Bahá'í International Community wrote:

*As we learn how best to utilize the earth's raw materials for the good of all, we must be conscious of our attitudes toward the source of our subsistence. Our activities must reflect the fact that the wealth and wonders of the earth are the common heritage of all people, who deserve just and equitable access to its resources. Our choices must evince an intergenerational perspective in which the well-being of future inhabitants is taken into account at all levels of decision-making. And in this turbulent period of human history, our activities must increasingly be tempered by the wisdom and judgment that come with growing maturity.*²⁰

A tool to measure our impact on the Earth is the “ecological footprint”. Today (2023), humanity uses the equivalent of about 1.7 planets to provide the resources we use and to absorb our waste.

Sustainability is not an entirely new idea. The Iroquois Confederacy, a Native Americans group, for instance, already taught the wisdom of considering the impacts of our actions on the future: “*Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground – the unborn of the future Nation.*”²¹

We are all part of the biosphere, the ecosystem Earth. True awareness of our interconnectedness and interdependence with all other living things, with previous and future generations, and with the Earth instills a profound feeling of humility. Such a state of mind is the necessary foundation for a sustainable approach to all our activities. We close this unit with the words of Bahá'u'lláh:

*Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory.*²²

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