

Scientific and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change

Unit 2

Science and Religion

(short version)

Section 1: Science

The faculty of intellectual investigation into the secrets of creation... is the most praiseworthy power of man, for through its employment and exercise the betterment of the human race is accomplished, the development of the virtues of mankind is made possible...

Through intellectual and intelligent inquiry science is the discoverer of all things. It unites present and past, reveals the history of bygone nations and events, and confers upon man today the essence of all human knowledge and attainment throughout the ages. By intellectual processes and logical deductions of reason this superpower in man can penetrate the mysteries of the future and anticipate its happenings.¹

Science is the first emanation from God toward man. All created beings embody the potentiality of material perfection, but the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone. Other beings and organisms are deprived of this potentiality and attainment. God has created or deposited this love of reality in man. The development and progress of a nation is according to the measure and degree of that nation's scientific attainments. Through this means, its greatness is continually increased and day by day the welfare and prosperity of its people are assured.²

God has conferred upon and added to man a distinctive power—the faculty of intellectual investigation into the secrets of creation -- the greatest virtue of which is scientific enlightenment. This endowment is the most praiseworthy power of man, for through its employment and exercise the betterment of the human race is accomplished, the development of the virtues of mankind is made possible...³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Our whole civilization, life as we know it, is built on scientific and technological advances. Science comes from the Latin word *scientia* which means "knowledge". Science is a specific process of learning to understand the reality of the universe. It is both an individual and a collective process that is progressing over time. Science is a method of investigating reality that minimizes the influence of bias or prejudice.

The science of climate change can explain and describe what is happening to the planet, for example, why glaciers are melting so fast, why sea levels have been rising, and why extreme weather conditions like heat waves, droughts, floods, and stronger storms have been increasing. Science and technology can also propose solutions to mitigate or adapt to climate change. However, the choice of solutions involves value judgments that are beyond the realm of science. Religion can provide the value system necessary for making decisions including climate-change policy.

Section 2: Religion

Religion serves the individual by providing enlightenment and spiritual guidance. At the same time, it helps society by providing an ethical framework:

God's purpose in sending His Prophets unto men is twofold. The first is to liberate the children of men from the darkness of ignorance, and guide them to the light of true understanding. The second is to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established. ⁴

Religion is the greatest of all means for the establishment of order in the world and for the peaceful contentment of all that dwell therein. ⁵

Bahá'u'lláh explains that society is negatively affected when people turn away from religion or when religion becomes corrupted:

...Religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world. ... Should the lamp of religion be obscured, chaos and confusion will ensue, and the lights of fairness and justice, of tranquillity and peace cease to shine... ⁶

Today we need this divine and transformative power of religion more than ever as we are facing planetary crises that are unprecedented in human history. Religion as renewed in the Bahá'í Faith provides a clear framework of ethics that can guide us in our actions to address these crises.

Religion exerts a profound influence on all societies and many of the world's peoples. Throughout history, it has proven to be the primary force for social progress, motivating individuals to develop spiritual qualities, and empowering them to sacrifice for their fellow human-beings and to contribute to the betterment of their communities. ⁷

Section 3: The Relationship of Science and Religion

The Universal House of Justice states that we should view “science and religion as *two independent yet complementary systems of knowledge* that propel human progress.”⁸

The principle of the harmony of science and religion means...that everything in this creation, all aspects of human life and knowledge, should be studied in the light of [religious] revelation as well as in that of purely rational investigation [i.e., science].⁹

The Universal House of Justice

Science and religion are tools to investigate reality from two different angles. Each discipline asks a fundamentally different question. Science asks: “*How* does the universe work?” Religion asks: “*Why* is there a universe and what is its purpose, and what is our purpose of existence as human beings?”

If science and religion ask fundamentally different questions and are complementary, how are they each to be used when we examine an issue of social concern?

The role of science is the assessment of facts and their potential physical and social consequences. After scientists provide citizens, politicians, and other stakeholders with the facts and consequences of concern, all stakeholders must use ethical values to make policy decisions about any actions to be taken that may affect society. Values and ethics are the domain of religion.

In the case of climate change, science can explain the causes of global warming and project with various amounts of certainty the impacts of the resulting changes in climate. It is then up to the public and to politicians to consider these facts, to apply values, and then to act accordingly.

In its statement *One Planet One Habitation – a Baha’i Perspective on Recasting Humanity’s Relationship with the Natural World*, the Baha’i International Community elaborates on science and religion as complementary systems of knowledge and practice:

In working to build a more sustainable world, humanity has at its disposal two mutually reinforcing systems of knowledge and practice: science and religion.

Scientific inquiry has been a vital instrument in seeking to understand physical reality and in forging innovative solutions based on a search for truth and a commitment to learning. When combined with values such as freedom from prejudice and bias it has enabled humanity to separate fact from conjecture. Scientific capabilities—of observing, measuring, rigorously testing ideas—have allowed us to construct a coherent understanding of the laws and processes governing physical reality, as well as to gain insights into human conduct and the working of society. Far from being the province of researchers and academics alone, the methodologies of scientific inquiry are tools that any individual or community can employ.

For its part, religion provides a framework by which high ideals can be applied to individual lives and to the life of society, for the betterment of all. The spiritual principles animating the world’s enduring religions have aided individuals and entire populations to grapple with questions of meaning, purpose, and the nature of the good life and the good society. When true to these ideals, religion has provided a bulwark against ideologies of materialism that would reduce human beings to mere resources to be exploited or consumers to be satiated. At its highest, religion has not only raised the call to virtues such as integrity, good character, high resolve, cooperation, and sacrificial endeavor, but drawn growing numbers together around such principles, unifying disparate elements, and giving rise to cohesive communities working to manifest high ideals in practice.

Taken together, science and religion provide fundamental organizing principles by which lasting progress can be made. When both the material and spiritual dimensions of humanity are kept in mind, and due attention is given to both scientific and spiritual knowledge, the tendency to reduce human progress to the consumption of goods, services, and technological packages is avoided. Both science and religion are essential to the liberation of individuals and communities from the traps of ignorance and passivity. Both are vital to the advancement of civilization.¹⁰

4. Misuse of Religion and Science

*Any agency whatever, though it be the instrument of mankind's greatest good, is capable of misuse.*¹¹

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

When talking about **religion** we should be aware that abuse and perversion of religion have often caused intolerance, fanaticism, oppression, and even war. This is, of course, in stark contradiction to the original teachings of all the world’s religions. The Bahá’í Faith, for example, admonishes that “religion should unite all hearts and cause wars and disputes to vanish from the face of the earth, give birth to spirituality, and bring life and light to each heart. If religion becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act. ...”¹²

Or as stated by Bahá'u'lláh, *“In matters of religion every form of fanaticism, hatred, dissension and strife is strictly forbidden.”*¹³

Most important for avoiding religious fanaticism is the use of reason and science.

Science can also be abused. The most widespread abuse of science and technology is their use without spiritual or ethical consideration. Such abuse frequently results in human rights violations and/or environmental problems and degradation. For example, if a company manufactures and sells sterile seeds, the farmers become dependent on that company to buy seeds every year. If bio-engineered seeds are sold, they can contaminate many native species of crop plants, which may result in the eventual loss of all these important food plants. Large-scale hydropower projects require the building of huge dams and the flooding of agricultural lands, forests, and villages, which causes the displacement of thousands of people. A very obvious example is the manufacturing of bombs and other weapons. The sale of weapons benefits some people economically, but harms innumerable other human beings who will be killed or wounded by these weapons. Today, even the sale and advertisement of medicines is geared towards the profit making of the pharmaceutical industry and not for the well-being of a sick person. There may well be scientists with much integrity and ethical values at work doing research on a specific medicine. However, the way much of this research is controlled and exploited by the pharmaceutical industry frequently lacks an ethical framework.

Deliberate **misrepresentation of science** by economic interests and political interference is another form of abuse. A case in point is the systematic disinformation campaign by the climate change skeptics. They are not following responsible scientific criticism, but through various tactics endeavor to shed doubts on climate science.

The warming of our planet Earth is a fact and not an opinion. That's the consensus of an overwhelming majority of scientists everywhere. The report by the Working Group 1 of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states: “Warming of the climate system is unequivocal.” “It is virtually certain that globally the troposphere has warmed since the mid-20th century.” The IPCC indicates the probability of “virtually certain” as 99–100%.¹⁴

The report also says that “It is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-20th century.” “Extremely likely” is defined as 95 – 100%. “The evidence for this has grown, thanks to more and better observations, an improved understanding of the climate system response and improved climate models,” explains a recent IPCC press release.

Most leading religious institutions have called for action on climate change as a moral responsibility including the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith.

Therefore, in this course we do *not* debate whether climate change is happening or not. The purpose of the course is to give a very basic introduction to the science of climate change. Based on that knowledge, we will apply spiritual principles and ethical standards as found in the scriptures of the world's religions. After establishing that foundation, we will be ready for a consultation about what we could do as individuals and religious communities to contribute to the mitigation of climate change.

Section 5: Science and Religion in this Course

*Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone, he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.*¹⁵

‘Abdu'l-Bahá

This course is based on both science and religion. Whenever the perspective of religion is used, quotations from religious scriptures are presented because they provide the ethical foundation. Moreover, the Word of God has the power to change human hearts. Similarly, when the perspective of science is used, scientific facts and direct statements from scientists are presented with supporting citations to the source.

REFERENCES

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- ¹ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 49
 - ² *Foundations of World Unity*, US Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979 sixth printing, p. 60-61
 - ³ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 30.
 - ⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXXIV, p. 79/80
 - ⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, quoted by The Universal House of Justice, 1985 Oct, *The Promise of World Peace*
 - ⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 125)
 - ⁷ Baha'i International Community, *The Role of Religion in Social Development*, 1994 <https://www.bic.org/statements/role-religion-social-development>
 - ⁸ Excerpts from the Letter of the Universal House of Justice, 2 April 2010, To the Believers in the Cradle of the Faith
 - ⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *Messages 1963 to 1986*, p. 388.

¹⁰ Baha'i International Community, *One Planet One Habitation – a Baha'i Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World*

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¹¹ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (2nd edition). Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983, p. 16

¹² `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p.130

¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tabernacle of Unity*, p. 39, 2:35

¹⁴ IPCC, *Guidance Note for Lead Authors of the IPCC Fifth Assessment Report on Consistent Treatment of Uncertainties*, Likelihood Scale on p. 3

¹⁵ `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 143