

Scientific and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change

Unit 9 – Reasons for Hope

Part 1

The Role of Religious Communities

Section 1: Dealing with the Emotional Stress Caused by Climate Change

Becoming aware of the immensity of the climate crisis can be emotionally stressful. A variety of emotions¹ can strike:

- *Loss and grief* because of the disappearance of plants and animals, of glaciers, of nature as we know it. The loss of a beloved place is sometimes referred to as solastalgia.
- *Anger* at big polluters or at people in power who have been ignoring the issue and resisting decisive action to mitigate climate change.
- *Guilt* at being part of a society that pollutes the atmosphere with greenhouse gases.
- *Fear* for the immediate future of many vulnerable people, for the future of our children, for the well-being of all life on Earth, and even for the survival of our civilization.
- *Despair* about the complexity of the crisis and the inability of existing institutions and systems to avert a deepening of the crisis, and for the people suffering from the effects of climate change, and for the world we are leaving to future generations.
- *Frustration* with the lack of acceptance and action by our political leaders and fellow citizens in the face of the overwhelming scientific evidence;
- *Alarm* at the changes which have been set in motion and the possible consequences for the natural world and of the unknown calamities yet to befall mankind.
- *Confusion*: not knowing what to do, what to believe, and whom to believe.

An increasing number of people are also traumatized by climate disasters, such as storms or floods. Many are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorders.

How can we deal with such stress? The most convenient reaction is to put our heads into the sand and continue with life as usual. In fact, it is quite tempting to deny the problem of climate change and to avoid learning more about it. By now we know that this is not an option.

Openly acknowledging the potential devastation of climate change is a quite severe mental test. However, tests can purify us and can help us to progress in our spiritual development. The story of Job in the Jewish and Christian traditions tells us of his untold suffering and unwavering belief in God. It shows that God's justice and mercy are a mystery, way beyond our understanding.

The Bahá'í Writings offer the following about suffering:

*"The mind and spirit of man advance when he is tried by suffering.... Man is, so to speak, unripe: the heat of the fire of suffering will mature him. Look back to the times past and you will find that the greatest men have suffered most. ... To attain eternal happiness one must suffer. He who has reached the state of self-sacrifice has true joy. Temporal joy will vanish."*²

*"O Son of Man! If adversity befall thee not in My path, how canst thou walk in the ways of them that are content with My pleasure? If trials afflict thee not in thy longing to meet Me, how wilt thou attain the light in thy love for My beauty?"*³

*"O Son of Man! My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit."*⁴

It takes great courage to recognize the scope of the threat of climate change. We can gain that courage by developing our capacities to know and to love, the most essential functions of the human being.⁵ This is the same spiritual love which is at the heart of all religions: the love for our Creator, the love for creation and nature, and the love for our fellow human beings, including those we don't know personally and who may live in a different country or a different continent. We need to include in that love future generations who will suffer the full extent of the impacts of climate change. Also, we may want to include the love for our own culture and the many diverse cultures all over the world, for music and art, and for all the positive aspects of our civilization, because they are also threatened by the long-term impacts of climate change.

Religion provides us with spiritual disciplines and tools that can sustain us on our journey. We know that prayer can strengthen us to cope with any situation. It also can support and guide us in our actions to mitigate climate change. Meditation can help us get a deeper understanding of our place as humans in the universe. During meditation we feel connected to God, to nature, to all other human beings who have lived in the past and in the present, and who will live in the future. This experience provides us with motivation, courage, and spiritual strength. Summoning that courage, we can continually educate ourselves about the reality of the state of our planet and the living conditions of people all around the world.

Going out into nature can also help restore our body and soul. Working the soil with our own hands and growing plants is healing. It also provides the satisfaction that comes with creating beauty and at the same time taking good care of a small part of

creation by nurturing soil quality, by helping to maintain biodiversity, and by growing some of our own food.

Economics professor and advisor to the United Nations for sustainable development Jeffrey Sachs puts it this way: “As individuals, our most important responsibility is a commitment to know the truth as best we can, truth that is both technical and ethical. Our saving grace will be a broadened scientific awareness combined with an empathy that enables us to understand the plight of the poor, the dispossessed, the young people without hope, or the rural communities challenged by bewildering change. Gandhi called his life an experiment in ‘living in truth’. That approach will have to become the experiment of our generation as well.”⁶

Psychologist Daniel Jordan explained how the Bahá'í teachings can help us cope with the present-day challenges: “The Writings reduce general anxiety and doubt to manageable proportions by making sense out of human history and the world's present state of perpetual crisis. This means that we need not pretend the crises do not exist or refuse to face them. Thus understanding something of the problems which face us not only reduces anxiety but attracts courage.”⁷

Most importantly, we can choose purposeful action that is carried by a deep sense of meaning. For example, we can reduce our own greenhouse gas emissions; we can join an organization that is similarly concerned; we can make a contribution to the betterment of the world by working together with others on some aspect of mitigating climate change. In the next unit, we will talk about action within our faith communities, especially about the many opportunities for education. Our actions don't need to be grandiose; the small efforts of millions of people can accomplish much change, including the necessary changes in laws and policies. Our individual life-circumstances will present each of us with different opportunities, but action to help solve a problem is a good antidote to the potential psychological damage of a “doom and gloom” outlook.

Section 2: The Role of Religious Communities

As long as humans have existed, Earth has always been here, providing our life-support system, seemingly inexhaustible, and taken for granted. Now, climate change threatens to seriously disrupt our benign biosphere that supports all life, destroying the very foundation of human civilization.

Climate activist Bill McKibben asks, “How, faced with the largest crisis humans have yet created for themselves, have we simply continued with business as usual?”⁸

Apart from the still widespread ignorance about climate change, the major reason for our slow response may be that we are still trapped in the selfish desires of our animal nature. Probably for the first time in history, each person on the planet will have to make sacrifices to benefit the survival of our species. This kind of cooperation fundamentally goes against our animal nature. The prevalent view of evolutionary theory expects us all to be selfish, even if cooperating would benefit the species as a whole. Self-sacrifice and cooperation for the good of the whole is thought to go against our “biology” or the “rules of nature” in the physical

dimension.⁹ This requires us to rise up to the divine dimension and seek spiritual solutions. It's the ultimate test for humanity as a whole: are people willing to rise above their personal desires to save the species? Can our cultural and spiritual development override the deeply set animal instinct to put ourselves above others, even when the personal sacrifice is minimal compared to the potential calamity facing humankind as a whole?

The greatest achievement of religion has been the elevation of human beings to their true spiritual station, thus transforming their moral characters. This is well explained in a statement of the Bahá'í International Community:

Through its teachings and through the examples of human lives illumined by these teachings, masses of people in all ages and lands have developed the capacity to love. They have learned to discipline the animal side of their natures, to make great sacrifices for the common good, to practice forgiveness, generosity, and trust, to use wealth and other resources in ways that serve the advancement of civilization. Institutional systems have been devised to translate these moral advances into the norms of social life on a vast scale. However obscured by dogmatic accretions and diverted by sectarian conflict, the spiritual impulses set in motion by such transcendent figures as Krishna, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Jesus, and Muhammad have been the chief influence in the civilizing of human character.¹⁰

In fact, these prophets have been the spiritual driving force behind the unfoldment of human civilizations. Their message, says Bahá'u'lláh, is “*endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame.*”¹¹

The disease which afflicts the body politic is lack of love and absence of altruism. The spiritual teachings of the religion of God can alone create this love, unity and accord in human hearts.¹²

‘Abdu'l-Bahá

“Be compassionate as God is compassionate.”¹³

“So, whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.”¹⁴

The Bible

Religion helps us to overcome our inherent egoism and to be concerned with loving, helping, and serving our fellow human beings. It is a prerequisite for us to be willing to adopt a simpler lifestyle and to change long-standing habits that cause pollution and climate change, as well as the exploitation of people in an unjust economic system. At the same time, religion can raise the consciousness of whole cultures and societies. Today, religion can expand our spirit of solidarity to include all of humankind, indeed all living beings on this planet.

Therefore, religious communities are especially responsible for responding to the moral imperative to take action to counter climate change, to apply spiritual principles to action, and to initiate the necessary changes in lifestyle.

It is heartening to see how environmental awareness and ethical response in religious communities are growing. There are now many faith-based environmental initiatives.

(Some examples: The United States has the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life¹⁵, the Jewish Organizations Adamah¹⁶ and Dayenu¹⁷, the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Studies, the Eco Justice programs of the National Council of Churches, the Catholic Laudato Si' Movement¹⁸, and the Interfaith Power and Light Organization¹⁹, which is an interfaith religious response to global warming. Similarly in the UK, we find the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Sciences²⁰, and the Christian Operation Noah²¹. In Australia, the Australian Religious Response to Climate Change²², a multi-faith network, is committed to taking action on climate change. GreenFaith²³ is striving to promote climate action by people of faith on the global level. Baha'is can find resources and support in the Baha'i-inspired International Environment Forum.²⁴)

It is necessary though that this spiritual commitment to environmental action doesn't remain at the fringes of religious life but becomes a priority in every community and in the heart of every individual.

Section 3: What is Progress?

Every crisis is also an opportunity. Climate change is an issue that demands global cooperation on a level never attained before. It is quite possible that the climate crisis will pressure humankind to come together in order to survive.

Whether in the life of the individual or that of society, profound change occurs more often than not in response to intense suffering and to unendurable difficulties that can be overcome in no other way. Just so great a testing experience, Bahá'u'lláh warned, is needed to weld the Earth's diverse peoples into a single people.²⁵

Thus, the urgency of the climate crisis may well lead to the unification of humankind, which would set the stage to solve other social problems as well. Abandoning war and weapons production could provide more than enough resources to build a carbon free economy, to restore such natural resources as forests and fisheries, to eradicate poverty, and to provide education and health care for everyone on the planet.

Building an environmentally and socially sustainable society could be the beginning of a new civilization that is more conducive to the individual's spiritual and society's cultural development. In rich countries, the widespread individualistic lifestyle, with its primary objective of increasing personal wealth, would need to gradually give way to a more community oriented, moderate way of life. Such community building can happen in many ways, for example with community gardens, decentralized renewable energy projects, the use of public transportation, and the sharing of resources. Such a reorientation has the potential to free the human mind from pursuing excessive material goods and to make space for creativity, more social interaction, and spiritual development. Everyone would be more fulfilled and happier than in today's individualistic, isolated, and stressful way of life.

In less developed countries, hunger and malnutrition could be eradicated, and education and health care improved, thus enabling people to develop their potentials and to be full participants in their local and global community. This can only be achieved if their economic development is sustainable, which means based on renewable energy. If the mistakes of fossil fuel dependency are repeated in developing countries, all other efforts to restore the Earth or to eradicate poverty would fail.

Section 4: A Promise and a Responsibility

*One generation goes and another generation comes; but the Earth remains forever.*²⁶

Ecclesiastes 1:4, Judaism

*Soon will the present-day order be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead.*²⁷

Bahá'u'lláh

Over the past 200 years, humanity has gone through unprecedented growth in every area: steep advances in scientific knowledge, the Industrial Revolution, and a quickly growing world population. The enormous pressures on the planet to feed and satisfy the needs and luxuries of the growing world population have assumed huge and dangerous proportions, bringing humanity to the brink of self-destruction.

At the same time, new ethical principles and standards of moral conduct have emerged and are becoming part of mainstream thought. For example: The concept of the equality of men and women, although not established everywhere, has become a commonly accepted standard of human civilization. Slavery, although unfortunately still widespread, is rejected as an unacceptable practice in our time. The concept of the planet as one homeland for one human family has started to permeate the thoughts and feelings of people all over the globe. And within only a few years, the knowledge about climate change has dramatically increased; we could say it has truly exploded. More and more scientists in many branches of science, ranging from geology to biology, are intensely studying the innumerable aspects of climate change. That knowledge is available to the general public. Movements to mitigate climate change are sprouting up in large numbers in all corners of the world and are gaining increasing momentum and strength. And governments and people in leadership positions have begun to take the issue seriously and to take action.

In many religions and traditions there are prophecies or visions of a glorious future for humankind.

These words are from the Judeo-Christian Religion:

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it.

And many people shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us of his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many people: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the LORD.²⁸

The following words are from the Bahá'í Writings:

Justice is, in this day, bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression. The thick clouds of tyranny have darkened the face of the earth, and enveloped its peoples.

Through the movement of Our Pen of glory We have, at the bidding of the omnipotent Ordainer, breathed a new life into every human frame, and instilled into every word a fresh potency. All created things proclaim the evidences of this world-wide regeneration. This is the most great, the most joyful tidings imparted by the Pen of this wronged One to mankind. Wherefore fear ye, O My well-beloved ones?²⁹

These assuring religious prophesies and visions provide us with hope and encouragement. Far from being a license for inaction, religious teachings call on us to take responsibility for the global situation in which we find ourselves today. The Universal House of Justice writes:

Humanity's crying need... calls... for a fundamental change of consciousness... that the time has come when each human being on earth must learn to accept responsibility for the welfare of the entire human family.³⁰

Scientist Michael Mann shared his realistic and still hopeful view: "Climate change is one of the greatest, if not *the greatest*, challenge ever faced by human society. But it is a challenge that we must confront, for the alternative is a future that is unpalatable, and potentially unlivable. While it is quite clear that inaction will have dire consequences, it is likewise certain that a concerted effort on the part of humanity to act in its own best interests has great potential to end in success."³¹

If we want to realize the vision of an ever-advancing civilization and of a spiritually developing world community, we must act now to preserve our Earth's living conditions.

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. ...

Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.³²

Bahá'u'lláh

A spiritual transformation of humankind is required to solve the climate crisis. It is quite exciting to be part of that process. Consider the following statement by `Abdu'l-Bahá:

And the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.³³

Can we succeed at building an environmentally and socially sustainable economy and a spiritually ever-advancing civilization? Quite possibly—but that clearly will require great effort on the part of each of us!

Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.³⁴

Bahá'u'lláh

Be the change you want to see in this world.³⁵

Anonymous, often attributed to Gandhi

Great is the station of man. Great must also be his endeavours for the rehabilitation of the world and the well-being of nations.³⁶

Bahá'u'lláh

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⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Persian Hidden Words*, No. No. 51

⁵ Assad Ghaemmaghami, PhD, Psychologist, in a personal communication

⁶ Jeffrey D. Sachs, *Common Wealth*, p. 336

⁷ Daniel Jordan, *Becoming Your True Self*, https://bahai-library.com/jordan_becoming_true_self

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¹¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 141-142

¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 171

¹³ Luke 6:36

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