

Soil in the Baha'i Faith

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Soil in the Bahá'í Faith

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(1) The Bahá'í approach to the land and soil does not make a particular distinction between this essential natural resource and all other environmental resources. It is the ecological balance of the world that must be respected, and this applies equally to soil, water, air, flora, fauna and all other dimensions of the environment. Each is a component of a single integrated system in which everything is in relation with everything else.

The mineral kingdom, with which the soil is our most immediate interface, is the most basic level of perfection in the material creation. From it spring the vegetable, animal and human kingdoms, each exemplifying higher levels of perfection. The atoms cycle through all of these levels, being transformed through myriad forms and conditions, and endowed with particular virtues and characteristics at each level. "For example, an atom of the soil or dust of earth may traverse the kingdoms from mineral to man by successive incorporations into the bodies of the organisms of those kingdoms.

At one time it enters into the formation of the mineral or rock; it is then absorbed by the vegetable kingdom and becomes a constituent of the body and fibre of a tree; again it is appropriated by the animal, and at a still later period is found in the body of man."(2)

For the soil, therefore, the ultimate fulfilment of its potential is to pass its substance on to, and to serve the production of plant life.

"The excellency, the adornment and the perfection of the earth is to be verdant and fertile through the bounty of the clouds of springtime. Plants grow; flowers and fragrant herbs spring up; fruit-bearing trees become full of blossoms and bring forth fresh and new fruit. Gardens become beautiful, and meadows adorned; mountains and plains are clad in a green robe, and gardens, fields, villages and cities are decorated. This is the prosperity of the mineral world."(3)

Since humanity has been endowed with science and reason, we have the power to modify and improve nature in support of civilization, a power that has been growing exponentially with recent developments in science

and technology. This science applies to soil as to all other resources.

But only when science is in harmony with religion, and respects and incorporates

essential ethical principles such as equity, moderation and concern for future generations, will we be able to find the ecological balance necessary to ensure sustainable soil productivity.

To be productive, soil must be cultivated, improved and enriched. "When we consider existence, we see that the mineral, vegetable, animal and human worlds are all in need of an educator. If the earth is not cultivated, it becomes a jungle where useless weeds grow; but if a cultivator comes and tills the ground, it produces crops which nourish living creatures. It is evident, therefore, that the soil needs the cultivation of the farmer."(4)

Without cultivation, soil does not fulfil its full potential to benefit human society. "It is an essential condition of the soil of earth that thorns, weeds and fruitless trees may grow from it. Relatively speaking, this is evil; it is simply the lower state and baser product of nature."(5)

It is agriculture that allows us to benefit from and augment the productivity of the soil, and this is therefore one of the most essential and important human activities. The Bahá'í writings state that "the fundamental basis of the community is agriculture, tillage of the soil,"(6) and "...the peasant class and the agricultural class exceed other classes in the importance of their service."(7)

Proper management of the soil is thus essential to an ever-advancing civilization,

and any misuse and degradation of the soil will weigh heavily on our future.

METAPHORIC USES OF SOIL AND EARTH

All the sacred scriptures have used metaphors, analogies and parables to explain abstract ideas. Our universal experience of the soil and its productive functions provides rich imagery to communicate fundamental spiritual concepts, while emphasizing the importance of soil itself. The writings of Bahá'u'lláh and the explanations of His son 'Abdu'l-Bahá make frequent reference to soil and earth, often to symbolize the material world, the material side of human nature, or the undeveloped human potential, drawing on the rich literary traditions and styles of the Persian and Arabic cultures in which they lived.

If the soil is compared to the human heart, soul or capacity, then the sun can be seen as God's love, the clouds and rain as the Holy Spirit and the bounty of divine Revelation, and plants as the spiritual qualities that grow from the effects of the spiritual on the material.

"...the clouds of Truth will continue to the end that hath no end to rain on the soil of human capacity, reality and personality their favors and bounties."(8)

"Wherefore sow the seeds of wisdom and knowledge in the pure soil of the heart, and keep them hidden, till the hyacinths of divine wisdom spring from the heart and not from mire and clay."(9)

"Ye are the saplings which the hand of Loving-kindness hath planted in the soil of mercy, and which the showers of bounty have made to flourish."(10)

"...the human reality is like the soil. If no bounty of rain descends from heaven upon the soil, if no heat of the sun penetrates, it will remain black, forbidding, unproductive; but when the moistening shower and the effulgent glow of the sun's rays fall upon it, beautiful and redolent flowers grow from its bosom."(11)

Fertile and barren soil

The comparison of fertile and barren soil with human hearts is a theme common to many religious traditions.

"Christ spoke a parable in which He said His words were like the seeds of the sower; some fall upon stony ground, some upon sterile soil, some are choked by thorns and thistles, but some fall upon the ready, receptive and fertile ground of human hearts. When seeds are cast upon sterile soil, no growth follows. Those cast upon stony ground will grow a short time, but lacking deep roots will wither away. Thorns and thistles destroy others completely, but the seed cast in good ground brings forth harvest and fruitage."(12)

"O my brother! A divine Mine only can yield the gems of divine knowledge, and the fragrance of the mystic Flower can be inhaled only in the ideal Garden, and the lilies of ancient wisdom can blossom nowhere except in the city of a stainless heart. 'In a rich soil, its plants spring forth abundantly by permission of its Lord, and in that soil which is bad, they spring forth but scantily.'(Qur'an 7:57)"(13)

"Know verily that the purpose underlying all these symbolic terms and abstruse allusions, which emanate from the Revealers of God's holy Cause, hath been to test and prove the peoples of the world; that thereby the earth of the pure and illuminated hearts may be known from the perishable and barren soil. From time immemorial such hath been the way of God amidst His creatures, and to this testify the records of the sacred books."(14)

The analogy applies equally to the effects of rain. "Should rain fall upon salty, stony earth, it will never have effect; but when it falls upon good pure soil, green and verdant growth follows, and fruits are produced."(15)

"Sterile soil will produce nothing, even if the cloud of mercy pours rain upon it a thousand years. We must make the soil of our hearts receptive and fertile by tilling in order that the rain of divine mercy may refresh them and bring forth roses and hyacinths of heavenly planting."(16)

"No matter how much the cloud may rain, the sun may shine and the breezes blow, the soil that is sterile will give no growth. The ground that is pure and free from thorns and thistles receives and produces through the rain of the cloud of mercy.... We must endeavor to free the soil of the hearts from useless weeds and sanctify it from the thorns of worthless thoughts in order that the cloud of mercy may bestow its power upon us. The doors of God are open, but we must be ready and fitted to enter."(17)

Cultivation and tillage

A further extension of the analogy is to the effort and suffering that we must endure in order to develop spiritually, comparable to the ploughing and cultivation of the soil.

"If we should relegate this plot of ground to its natural state, allow it to return to its original condition, it would become a field of thorns and useless weeds, but by cultivation it will become fertile soil, yielding a harvest. Deprived of cultivation, the mountain slopes would be jungles and forests without fruitful trees. The gardens bring forth fruits and flowers in proportion to the care and tillage bestowed upon them by the gardener. Therefore, it is not intended that the world of humanity should be left to its natural state. It is in need of the education divinely provided for it. The holy, heavenly Manifestations of God have been the Teachers. They are the divine Gardeners Who transform the jungles of human nature into fruitful orchards and make the thorny places blossom as the rose."(18)

"Holy souls are like soil which has been plowed and tilled with much earnest labor, the thorns and thistles cast aside and all weeds uprooted. Such soil is most fruitful, and the harvest from it will prove full and plenteous. In this same way man must free himself from the weeds of ignorance, thorns of superstitions and thistles of imitations that he may discover reality in the harvests of true knowledge."(19)

"The labourer cuts up the earth with his plough, and from that earth comes the rich and plentiful harvest. The more a man is chastened, the greater is the harvest of spiritual virtues shown forth by him."(20)

"Just now the soil of human hearts seems like black earth, but in the innermost substance of this dark soil there are thousands of fragrant flowers latent. We must endeavor to cultivate and awaken these potentialities, discover the secret treasure in this very mine and depository of God, bring forth these resplendent powers long hidden in human hearts. Then will the glories of both worlds be blended and increased and the quintessence of human existence be made manifest."(21)

Humility

The earth is also the ultimate symbol of humility. "They who are the beloved of God... should conduct themselves in such manner that the earth upon which they tread may never be allowed to address to them such words as these: 'I am to be preferred above you. For witness, how patient I am in bearing the burden which the husbandman layeth upon me. I am the instrument that continually imparteth unto all beings the blessings with which He Who is the Source of all grace hath entrusted me. Notwithstanding the honor conferred upon me, and the unnumbered evidences of my wealth - a wealth that supplieth the needs of all creation - behold the measure of my humility, witness with what absolute submissiveness I allow myself to be trodden beneath the feet of men....'"(22)

"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."(23)

Can there be a better expression of the material and spiritual significance of soil?

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