



dominance of a postmodern perspective that completely denies the very idea of human nobility.

Sorokin, a famous sociologist, contrasted two systems of culture which he called ideational and sensate systems. The ideational culture believes that reality

is ultimately spiritual and finds humans as noble beings. The sensate culture sees reality and truth as purely materialistic and sensory and thus degrades humans to a mere selfish calculus of pleasure and pain. Sorokin is partly right but he underestimates the way sensate modernity has also extolled human nobility. The Eastern perspective is a religious perspective. It defines humans as

the image of God, a spiritual being who is oriented towards eternal truth and eternal values, and therefore finds humans noble and sacred. This perspective is

found in all spiritual traditions. Zoroaster finds humans as apex of creation, one

who is the reflection of the Supreme God Ahura Mazda, Lord of Wisdom. The other six beings whose creation precedes the creation of humans are reflections of six lower divinities. These holy spirits are expressions of various names and

attributes of Ahura Mazda. These six levels of creation are sky, earth, water, plants, cow and fire. Each is protected by and reflects one of six sacred spirits.

Cows for example represent good purpose while fire and sun reflect the cosmic order and truth, "asha", or truthfulness. Humans are defined as reflection of the

wisdom of Ahura Mazda and a representative of God. In Judaism humans are made in the image of God, endowed with a soul, and therefore praised as a sacred reality. Christianity and Islam have confirmed that same truth. Hinduism has consistently affirmed the identity of God and soul, or Brahma and "atman,"

as the supreme truth of reality. Both Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita emphasize the fact that the truth of human being is God. Finally in Buddhism, the supreme spiritual consciousness is the realization that all humans and all reality have within them the Buddha nature. Our spiritual truth is Buddha.

While there is a beautiful truth in all these assertions, unfortunately clerical

understanding of their religions usually have turned their religions into a justification of various forms of oppression, cruelty, intolerance and degradation

of human beings. Beyond beautiful slogans of man as image of God, history of religions is filled with traditionalism, justification of religious and political

despotism, acceptance or active encouragement of slavery, patriarchy, intolerance against unbelievers, ideas of ritual impurity of other human beings,

avoidance of other human beings, discrimination against other religions,

superstitious beliefs and active opposition against science and reason, killing of people who change their religion (apostasy), and dividing in the name of God human societies as the realms of peace or war. Looking at Hindu caste system or burning of living widows with their dead husbands, or the ignorance and violence of the Medieval Christianity, or the superstitious, intolerant and violent interpretations of Islam currently so influential in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and Syria, Saudi Arabia, Africa and other places it is easy to see the inadequacy and contradictions of the traditional Eastern praise of human nobility.

The Western modernity offered a radically opposite conception of human nobility. Centered on 18 th century philosophy of the enlightenment, modernity supported a rational form of authority in place of the pre-modern traditional authority. According to Max Weber, in traditional authority the determinant of norms and values is the past tradition. Whatever has existed in the past becomes

sacred and binding. In this way of thinking humans renounce their reason and freedom and are blindly determined by purely external factors. Such dehumanization of humans became the main target of the modernity and its rationalistic project. In order to save human rationality, dignity and freedom, they revolted against traditionalism and rejected a religious understanding of human beings. Western modernity argued that the basis of moral and ethical values is reason. Humans can discover what is good or bad on the basis of their internal rational capacity, and they do not need God or revelation to discover what they should do. Law becomes legislated by humans through their rational deliberations. The source of human degradation is human error, and this error is

chiefly caused by religious belief and superstitions. Suddenly, there emerges a new basis for nobility of humans. Humans become noble because humans are merely a part of nature and because there is no God.

The philosophy of the Enlightenment not only revolted against various forms of religious superstition, intolerance and violence, they also rejected the Christian

negative definition of human beings. While Christianity perceives humans as spiritual and sacred, yet Christian clerics misinterpreted the Bible in terms of

the doctrine of original sin. Humans were noble in Eden, but after the sin of Adam and Eve they became sinful and wicked by blood. 17 th century philosopher Pascal is famous for his statement ‘We are born unjust since everyone cares about himself.’ Beyond noble slogans about human soul, the dominant vision among Christians degraded humans as deprived of freedom and inherently evil and selfish. The purpose of education and social institutions

were, therefore, violent and authoritarian transformation of human nature. Many 17 th century European philosophers redefined this idea. It is true, they said,

that

humans are selfish and evil, yet through the intervention of God the unintended consequence of their selfish acts become social harmony and morality.

However, the 18th century philosophy of the Enlightenment took this concept to a new exaggerated height. Most of them argued that following one's self interest is the essence of morality and ethical action. As Voltaire reacted to Pascal's word, it is good to be selfish and act accordingly. It is this

pursuit of

self-interest which becomes the main cause of human prosperity, harmony and progress. Adam Smith's idea of invisible hand was an economic expression of the same virtue. Humans are noble because they act in accordance with the law of nature, follow their self-interests and use their reason to secure their happiness and utility. Unlike Christian doctrine of original sin, humans are born

noble because they are part of a God-less nature. This radical materialistic view

defined human liberation as a revolt against religion and monarchy. In his *System of Nature*, the famous philosopher Baron d'Holbach argued that despotic God of religions is the mirror image of the despotic monarchs. Humans will live in bondage and debasement as long as they live in accordance with the arbitrary and irrational dictates of gods and monarchs. This theme was developed by later philosophers including Feuerbach and Nietzsche. Feuerbach, whose ideas greatly influenced Marx, argued that God is a mere projection of exaggerated human nature to the clouds. There exist only humans and there is no God. But humans alienate their own perfections from themselves, exaggerate their own estranged nature, project it to the clouds and call it God. Feuerbach noted that all attributes of God are in fact human attributes. Therefore, he said,

we create God in our own image. This meant that religion is the essence of self-

alienation of humans from their own nature and truth. Thus according to this theory, humans become degraded and worthless by such alienation. After we gave all our perfections to God we are left with nothing. Now we have to beg God in prayers and rituals to give us back some of our estranged nobility.

Religion, in other words, is the main source of human degradation, whereas atheism is affirmation of human nobility. Similarly, Nietzsche argued that humans can only become free to choose their destiny and values and develop their natural excellence and will to power when God is dead. Sartre was saying the same thing when he conditioned human freedom on non-existence of God.

The logical conclusion of this materialistic trend was realized in various philosophical interpretations of Darwinism, which reduced humans to the level of animals, justified war and violence, accepted extremes of inequality among humans as natural and moral, supported racism by defining different groups of humans as occupying different levels in the ladder of biological evolution and justified colonialism and all kinds of cruelty through its doctrine of the survival

of the fittest. Modern culture which celebrated human selfishness and defined

the purpose of life as material and sexual gratification, has led to unbelievable

environmental disasters, increasing poverty and class inequality in various countries, a sickening international inequality among nations, a militarized world in which science has become an instrument of violence and destruction, and producing desire-seeking humans whose taste, ends and aspirations are increasingly manufactured by a narcissistic and materialistic world obsessed with money and material values. It is no wonder that such praise of human nobility became the crudest form of human debasement.

It was the internal contradictions of both pre-modern and modern philosophies which led to the increasing triumph of a postmodern viewpoint. The postmodern view is rooted in Nietzsche's revolt against reason, truth and morality. For Nietzsche, the reason of the Enlightenment is another form of God which has to be killed. There is no truth and no value. There is only will to power. Death of God and reason meant for Nietzsche that everything is permitted. In fact he found ideas of equality, political democracy, human rights,

equality of men and women and rejection of slavery as illusions that are rooted in a dead God. Postmodern philosophy rejected all systems of truth with radical doubt and uncertainty. Reason is equal to any system of superstition, and they are all equal in terms of their truth value. Consequently there is no objective or

universal ethical value either. All values are arbitrary and they are equally valid.

With denial of universal values came cultural relativism. The only criterion of good or bad is the internal culture and tradition of a society. But postmodern worldview equally rejected the very concept of human being. There is no such thing as human being. We are, they argued, shadows of specific social and cultural groups and our identity is nothing but those specific identities.

There

are only particular people with specific language, religion, ethnicity, nationality

and culture. But there is no human being as human being. Marxist theory also defined humans as social products and reduced humans to their society. Yet Marxist theory was deterministic and believed in some universal systems and values. Postmodernism, on the other hand, rejected all deterministic truth systems and all values. There is no universal economic law which determines all history. It is only fragmented histories of particular cultures without any holistic

reality. Humans are products of different systems of signs. Language, for example is defined in terms of specific ways that various signs relate to each other. Meaning of words has no connection with any objective reality. On the contrary, meanings are created by the internal system of the relation of words or

signs to each other. Suddenly, the real world become an illusion and what is left

as true is a virtual reality of signs and images. In this postmodern world

there is

no truth, no objective value and no human being. Naturally in this system there can be no room for the concept of human dignity, human nobility or human rights.

Unlike Nietzsche, postmodern philosophers were not truly honest. Postmodern view in fact has divided the world in two parts. It applies its cultural relativism

to the non-Western parts of the world, and therefore it has become the darling theory of all tyrants and fanatics of the world who try to justify their archaic and

anti-human practices in terms of the sanctity of their own cultures. It is no wonder that despots, violent theocratic movements all reject the universal concept of human rights because they are defining values in terms of their own native traditions. This is not surprising. Cultural relativism of postmodernism leaves no standard for determining good or bad except one's past culture and tradition. Consequently, postmodern worldview unintentionally returns to the pre-modern traditionalistic worldview by celebrating and glorifying past traditions as the sole criterion of values. On the other hand, postmodern thought

rejects its cultural relativism in regard to the West and becomes a champion of equality, democracy, and socialism in Western societies. Western traditions are defined as evil embodiment of colonialism, racism, patriarchy, and capitalism.

It is clear that human nobility requires a worldview that transcends not only the

postmodern inconsistency and relativism, but also the contradictions of Eastern and Western systems. Such concept of human nobility is at the heart of the worldview of the Baha'u'llah.

#### Baha'u'llah's Approach to Human Nobility

The Eastern and religious approach to human nobility is inadequate because although it gives beautiful metaphysical slogans about human nobility, it does not translate those slogans into concrete social teachings and laws which safeguard human dignity and human rights. There is abstract discussion of dignity of human beings or glorification of justice, yet these slogans are not accompanied with a discussion of institutional conditions for realization of human dignity. Speaking of human dignity when one defends slavery, political despotism, clerical despotism, patriarchy, religious discrimination, unity of church and state, the law of apostasy, ritual impurity of others and holy war is

of no value. Similarly, the Western materialistic modernity's support for many

institutional conditions of human rights, like political democracy, separation of

church and state and individual rights becomes seriously undermined when it is not accompanied with a spiritual definition of culture and values which define the world as a kingdom of spirit rather than a jungle. By reducing humans to the

level of jungle, the very basis of modern values and ideals becomes arbitrary

and senseless. Both these perspectives suffer a lack of historical consciousness.

Baha'u'llah, unites the Eastern spiritual exaltation of humans with the Western attention to the social and institutional requirements of human nobility. This unity is mediated by his emphasis on historical consciousness.

#### A. From Rousseau to Baha'u'llah

In order to understand Baha'u'llah's approach to human dignity, it is useful to

compare one of his statements with the most famous statement of Rousseau. Among philosophers of the Enlightenment both Rousseau and Kant showed significant sympathy both for spiritual ideas and altruistic values, a sympathy which set them apart from the mainstream of the Enlightenment. Rousseau's philosophy can be seen in his widely quoted opening statement of his book *Social Contract*: "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." This statement contrasts the original natural state of human being with his current situation in society and culture. Humans in their natural state living in jungle

were free but they became debased and unfree under social institutions.

Yet there are different interpretations of Rousseau's statement. In his earlier

work, *On the Origin of Inequality*, he argued that man in jungle was noble and honest, but society through its institution of private property made him a hypocrite, dependent on recognition of others, and a slave to artificial needs.

But in his *Social Contract*, Rousseau argues that humans can become free under a direct democratic form of state, when each individual freely gives up his freedom and identifies with the general will of society. It is curious that he defines the source of unfreedom as private property and culture, yet he offers the path to freedom as a democratic form of state, culture and society. On the one hand humans are free when they are part of nature, on the other hand they become free when humans live under a particular form of society and culture.

Furthermore, *Social Contract* does not touch the institution of private property and yet speaks of democratic state as a return to freedom. In addition to this contradiction, it is the case that the ideas of the state of nature and its imagined

human freedom are nothing but myth. Human consciousness, language and thinking become possible under interaction with other human beings. In other words, society and culture is the very condition of the emergence of man, his consciousness, and his freedom. 17th century philosopher Hobbes had also talked of natural man but this man was brutish, violent, cheating and selfish.

In

his theory, it was culture and state that could bring freedom to human beings. There is another way that Rousseau's word can be interpreted. State of nature means the past form of society and culture and not a natural situation. This is when humans were immersed in their group, were similar to other members of the group and were defined by a collective tribal identity. In this situation

there

was no division of labor, no inequality among individuals and no individual decision making. Opposed to this becomes the present situation when individuals have become different from each other, pursue their self-interest, and are alienated from their group. For Rousseau, the first situation was good whereas the current one is evil. His democratic “general will” was supposed to

be a civilized return to the identity of individual with the group. Even if we interpret Rousseau in this way, his word remains problematic. We know now that neither political democracy is sufficient for preventing the emergence of extremes of inequality and narcissistic individuals, nor absolute submission to the general will is a path to freedom. In fact totalitarian state is an example of

this absolute reduction of individual freedom to submission to an unconstrained general will.

Even though Rousseau’s statement is contradictory and confused, it points to a

serious concept. Humans are born noble and free and yet they are violent, selfish, and unfree. Baha’u’llah also talks of the same contradiction. But his

words point to the contradiction between two forms of culture, a culture that is

based on the laws of spirit, and a culture that is based on the laws of jungle.

According to Baha’u’llah humans are created rich, noble, wise and loving, yet

they have made themselves poor, debased, ignorant, and violent. But this original situation is not the life in jungle. Instead, it is the life of spirit and its

potentialities. It is the reduction of spirit to the level of nature and following the

laws of jungle in society that causes human degradation and misery. Humans are born noble because they are a spiritual being, and they become degraded when they forget their spiritual identity and see themselves as beasts and brutes.

In the Arabic part of the Hidden Words, Baha’u’llah writes:

« O SON OF SPIRIT! I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself? Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I molded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self- subsisting. »

It is important to note that in this statement God is addressing man as “son of

spirit”. In other words humans are born noble because their true identity is spirit. They are the image of God. But humanity’s true identity is here defined

as being rich, noble, rational, and loving. The structure of

Baha'u'llah's

statement is dialectical. It begins by affirming the noble and rich character of

human being as spirit. Then it affirms the negation of that spiritual perfection in

the current culture which has reduced human beings to the level of jungle.

Finally, it resolves this contradiction by reminding people that they should remember their truth, to reexamine themselves, discover their spiritual identity,

and actualize their spiritual potentials as the throne of God. Spiritualization of

culture, a culture in which human dignity is lived and institutionalized, is the

purpose of human history.

Baha'u'llah's statement defines the nobility of man in terms of his rich spiritual

potential. In the early parts of *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Baha explains this richness of humans as their spiritual potentialities and perfections.

True happiness, freedom and bliss are possible through such spiritual orientation. This is a key concept in Baha'i understanding of human dignity.

Human social institutions should be judged in terms of this key value. Forms of culture which encourage and support the actualization of these rich potentials are compatible with human nobility. That is why education is of such vital importance in affirmation of human nobility. Since humans are created rich in their spiritual potentials, human nobility requires treating humans as noble and

endowed with inalienable rights. This nobility necessitates participation of humans in determination of their lives. But this self-determination in turn is dependent on a culture which rejects prejudice and imitation of others and instead encourages individuals to think for themselves and seek knowledge independently. This independent thinking destroys various ideologies of hate and estrangement, undermines all kinds of prejudice and encourages a culture of peace, non-violence, unity and universal love.

The emphasis on realization of potentialities is inseparable from

Baha'u'llah's

conception of human dignity. In a passage he writes: "Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom." In another passage he says

"The gem of humanness is hidden in human beings. It must be made manifest through the cleansing burnish of education." (author's translation)

Culture,

therefore, is the necessary condition for both dignity and freedom of human beings, but this culture is a culture which cleanses humans from brutish life of

selfishness, ignorance, enslavement, prejudice, violence and intolerance.

Before discussing the details of Baha'u'llah's views on human nobility it is useful to refer to some of his words and teachings that emphasize human dignity. In one place he says "Bloodshed and discord is worthy of the beasts in

the field, and what befiteth human dignity is virtuous deeds." (author's translation)

Here the dignity of humans is based on their transcendence from the laws of brutish nature and acting in accordance with unity and love. In another passage he says "What befiteth man is humanness. A human being should not concentrate all his endeavors on his own ego.

« Be ye concerned, in utmost striving, with improving each other's circumstances." (author's translation)

Here humanness or insaniyyat is defined in terms of mutual solidarity, altruism,

and service. In a famous passage, Baha'u'llah gives a new definition of human

being: "That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service

of the entire human race." This statement defines a new concept of identity for

human beings, a concept which completely transcends any natural, kinship, or traditional forms of tribal identity, a concept that makes humans citizens of the

republic of spirit. In another passage, he says "Reason is a messenger of God and a manifestation of the divine name Omniscient. It is through reason that human nobility is revealed and made visible." (author's translation). Here human reason is defined as the realization of human nobility. But this reason is

a spiritual reality and a reflection of God. It is a reason which discovers the interdependence of all reality, and the unity and oneness of all human beings.

This reason is not the Enlightenment's reason, namely a calculus of self-interest, a slave of brutish desires. Likewise, it is not a reason that in thousands

of years have fabricated various vain imaginings as justification of mutual alienation, hatred, discrimination, and murder of other human beings in the name of race, religion, gender, nationality, honor, and other social constructs.

Reason is, on the contrary, the consciousness of the spiritual reality of all beings, a discovery of the dignity, equality, solidarity and unity of all reality

including all human beings.

Baha'u'llah's ordinances are direct affirmation of human dignity. For example,

when advising the believers when they attain the presence of himself,

Baha'u'llah forbids them to engage in bowing down or prostration before him or any other human being. He says that only God is worthy of such acts, and

that no human being should degrade himself before another. It is for the same reason that Baha'u'llah has forbidden kissing hands of anyone, because all humans as spirit and image of God are equal and sacred. The same philosophy forbids begging, since one who begs is debasing and humiliating himself before others. Similarly, Baha'u'llah forbids confession of sins before any human being.

#### B. Institutionalization of Human dignity

For Baha'u'llah the issue is not the contradiction of nature versus culture, rather

it is the opposition of one form of culture against another. The truth of human being is his spiritual reality. When humans live in accordance with their true identity they are realizing their inherent nobility. However, if the form of culture applies the laws of jungle to the realm of human reality the result is oppression and degradation of human beings. The ultimate source of all human debasement is the reduction of humans to the level of beasts. In other words, it

is the application of the law of nature, the struggle for existence, to the realm of

society and social institutions that is the root cause of injustice and enslavement

of humans. In *Some Answered Questions*, discussing the cause of economic problems of the contemporary capitalist society of his time, 'Abdu'l-Baha argues that the root cause of strike and other socio-economic difficulties lies in

the application of the law of nature to human society:

Now the root cause of these difficulties lies in the law of nature that govern present-day civilization, for it results in a handful of people accumulating vast

fortunes that far exceed their needs, while the greater number remain naked, destitute, and helpless. (SAQ,315)

In this quotation, 'Abdu'l-Baha condemns extremes of inequality of a pure capitalist system. But unlike Marx who thought all problems are caused by economic and material factors, 'Abdu'l-Baha finds pure capitalism as one of the

embodiments of a naturalistic philosophy that reduces humans to the level of nature. Marxist philosophy itself is another expression of the same root cause.

That is why in that same discussion 'Abdu'l-Baha emphasizes that both communism and unchecked capitalism are various forms of dehumanization of humans. Both are opposed to a spiritual understanding of humans and their inherent dignity and nobility. Pure capitalism reduces society to the struggle for

existence as the economics of free market where selfishness is glorified, whereas communism denies individual uniqueness, autonomy and freedom by forcing equality of outcomes on all human activities. Such equality is only possible if state regulates the details of individual behaviors and reduces human

beings to obedient and docile machines in society.

The emphasis on mystical and inherent nobility of humans does not remain an empty slogan in Baha'i writings. On the contrary writings of Baha'u'llah are

geared towards realization of this inherent spiritual nobility at the level of social

institutions. One major expression of this viewpoint is Baha'u'llah's condemnation of both religious despotism and political despotism. Fifty years before the constitutional revolution, Baha'u'llah called for political democracy. Democracy is the only form of state that is compatible with a spiritual definition of humans. If humans are seen and treated as spirit, consciousness and noble, then all humans are capable of independent judgment, equal and endowed with rights. In this situation only a true consultation can be

the legitimate basis of political decision making. Political despotism, on the other hand, is a form of society in which all humans are reduced to the level of objects and animals, while one person is defined as superior and capable of thinking and making decisions. All despotic forms of politics, therefore, are contradictory to the nobility of human beings. Furthermore, it is a democratic and participatory form of society that encourages and facilitates the development of human potentialities. On the contrary, despotism stifles the emergence of humans as human. But Baha'u'llah's call for political democracy

was far more complex than such discussions by later Iranian intellectuals. In January 1861 Baha'u'llah wrote his *Kitab-i-Iqan*. The entire message of this book is a rejection of spiritual despotism, affirmation of the independence and rationality of all human beings, abolishing priesthood and calling for a culture

of independent investigation of truth. The first sentence of *Iqan* is a reinterpretation of the traditional concept of detachment as the precondition of

attaining spiritual truth: "No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true

understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth."

The main point of this sentence is that all human beings can and should engage in independent investigation of truth. But such knowledge is contingent on detachment from all other human beings. Detachment here is interpreted as independence of mind, when individual is not a blind follower of the social, cultural, and religious prejudices around him. One has to be detached from all others to be able to understand the truth. Blind imitation of religious leaders is

utter self-degradation and a voluntarily self-dehumanization. For Baha'u'llah

such detachment and independence is the realization of spiritual democracy.

Even the administrative apparatus of the Baha'i community is governed by democratic institutions because there is no priest or akhund in his religion.

For

Baha'u'llah, realization of spiritual democracy is the essential condition for realization of true political democracy. That is why for the Baha'u'llah both forms of democracy require separation of church and state. All these three main institutional teachings of Baha'u'llah are rooted in his belief in the primordial nobility of all human beings. Unfortunately the history of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran was the neglect of the insights of Baha'u'llah. The worst mistake made by many Iranian intellectuals was that instead of condemning both forms of despotism, their critique of political despotism took the form of glorification of spiritual despotism and celebration of the rule of religious leaders, which in turn eliminated the possibility of any real political democracy as well. It is in this context that we can understand the historical significance of the word of Baha'u'llah who in late 1860s announced 'From two ranks amongst men power hath been seized, kings and ecclesiastics.' Here Baha'u'llah sees the future of humanity a future of both political and spiritual democracy, a future in which enslavement of mind by clerics as well as enslavement of life by despots are discarded. It is evident that renouncing one's independent judgment and submitting blindly to the authority of the clerics reduce people to the level of objects. Such culture of imitation and bondage is the main obstacle against the actualization of human spiritual potentials.

A related expression of the principle of human dignity in the writings of Baha'u'llah is the categorical prohibition of slavery. In 1868, in his tablets addressed to the rulers of the world, Baha'u'llah condemned the institution of slavery. In 1873 in his Most Holy Book he prohibited slavery arguing that all human beings are servants of God, all are symbols of divine glory and thus no human can be a slave to another. But decades before these well-known passages, Baha'u'llah wrote that all human beings are servants of God and utter nothingness before God. Therefore how can any human claim to own another, while he himself is a servant of God. In this moving tablet which is one of the earliest writings of Baha'u'llah, he is simultaneously affirming human servitude before God, and human nobility, sacredness and dignity precisely because they are all images of God. We remember that even until 1962 when slavery is made illegal in Saudi Arabia, the religious leaders of Mecca and Medina were defending slavery because they argued what God has made lawful no human can make it unlawful.

Another foundational implication of the doctrine of the nobility of human spirit is Baha'u'llah's rejection of international anarchy which is the application of the law of nature to the realm of international relations. Although many people have recognized the necessity of democratic rule at the level of nation states, most people still believe that non-democratic and anarchic form of decision making at the level of global affairs is natural and moral. But this anarchy of international relations have brought increasing international inequality, global poverty, international violence, global crime, terrorism, destruction of the environment, militarization of the world and genocidal wars to our planet. Baha'u'llah found this situation contrary to human dignity. Therefore he called for extending the rule of democratic decision-making to the international relations, calling for collective disarmament and security and fostering global prosperity rather than poverty and war.

The current state of international anarchy is the greatest obstacle for free realization of human potentialities. Among the outcomes of this international anarchy are both increasing significance of citizenship as the main basis of social inequality and oppression, and colonialism and colonial aggression. Baha'u'llah found both these forms of oppression as debasing humanity and inimical to spiritual development of individuals. In the past all societies were enjoying relatively similar levels of economic and technological efficiency. The result was that citizenship was not a serious basis of inequality and injustice.

But from 19th century a widening international inequality has made citizenship the best predictor of the life chances of human beings. A child accidentally born in a poor part of the world is condemned to a life of poverty and disease, whereas another child born in a rich part of the world is born with various opportunities that are guaranteed by citizenship rights. Our world considers such gross, senseless, and unjust inequality and oppression as just and natural.

But Baha'u'llah announced in the middle of 19th century that "the world is but one country and mankind its citizens." He called the leaders of the world to recognize that not only nation states, but also the entire world has assumed an organic, interrelated and interdependent character. Unless humanity becomes conscious of itself as leaves and branches of one and the same tree and regards the world as one human body no major social problem can be truly resolved. Colonialism is another outcome of a world which divides the people into insiders and outsiders. The logic of behavior which is applied to the outsiders is one of dehumanization and violence and qualitatively different from the logic

applied to the insiders. Baha'u'llah rejected colonialism and militarism by arguing that true honor and glory is not for one who loves his self, his family, his religion, or his country. Rather true honor is for one who loves the entire human race. Loving one's country is a spiritual duty of all human beings, but such love should be accompanied with loving the entire human race. Otherwise, namely when one defines patriotic love in terms of hatred and dehumanization of others, colonialism against others become moral and legitimate. Writings of Baha'u'llah are filled with condemnation of colonialism. In 1882, in what is called Urabi Revolt, the British navy bombarded Alexandria and invaded Egypt. This colonial occupation of Egypt was the inception of formal British colonialism of the Middle East. Baha'u'llah's reaction to this historic colonial invasion was swift and uncompromising. In a number of tablets he wrote shortly after the event, Baha'u'llah condemns British colonialism of Egypt, asks the Baha'is to pray for the victory of the Egyptians, and condemns all rationalizations of such violence on the basis of religion or patriotic honor, arguing that: Vast majority of wars in the world are waged out of mere corrupt desires, yet they are falsely attributed to religion, honor, and country. Religion and country bear witness to the falsehood of these people. Say! The world is but one country, and all are created by the same Word. Wherefore ye wage wars, and whom ye consider as enemy? (author's translation, unpublished)

For Baha'u'llah the world stands at a crossroad. For most human history, humans frequently have perceived themselves and others as brutes and beasts and therefore have acted according to the law of struggle for existence. However, the low technological development of humanity in the past prevented them from causing major damage to the planet. But this began to change in 19th century. Rapid technological developments created a situation in which humans became capable of unimaginable destruction and murder. Unconstrained by animal instincts and equipped with enormous power for destruction, now humanity's pursuit of the natural law of struggle for existence leads to destruction of life on planet earth. While the law of nature, including the principle of struggle for existence, is sacred and good at the level of nature, and leads to ecological balance and sustaining of life on our planet, human imitation of the same law leads to destruction of nature as well as human species. The time has come to realize our spiritual reality and live in accordance with a culture of love and unity. This is worthy of human dignity.

### C. Reinterpretation of Religion

In discussing the statement of Baha'u'llah in Arabic Hidden Words, we noted that God addresses humans as sons of spirit and affirms that in their original creation as spirit they are born rich, noble, wise and loving. He also emphasizes

that the present condition of humanity is the exact opposite. Therefore, God asks humans to gaze at themselves in order to discover that God is present within each and every human being. This dialectical statement points to the divine nature of humanity and asks for actualization of human spiritual potentials. We noted that Baha'u'llah calls for a radical transformation of the social institutions of the world in order to bring about conditions which make such realization of human potentialities possible.

But in order to make this translation of mystical nobility of humans to the nobility of actual living human beings we need yet another change. This time the change is within religious and mystical worldview itself. Aside from social teachings of religions which need to be redefined in terms of the requirement of human equality and dignity, we need to change our conceptions of God and his justice in ways that become compatible with human nobility. In this discussion I will address three principal religious ideas and explain the way Baha'u'llah reinterprets them. These are millenarian expectations of a savior, the belief in the day of resurrection, and definition of religion and revelation.

The first issue is the millenarian expectations of various religions. Most of the times, these millenarian expectations await the realization of divine justice on earth through the appearance of a savior. This savior, however, is usually defined in most violent forms, as a mass murderer who kills all people who are outside of the specific version of that religion. In this way genocide becomes the definition of justice. This view is of course not compatible with any conception of human nobility or a just God. Instead, it is the internalization of an extreme brutish logic of struggle for existence. That is why the Baha'u'llah defined himself as the realization of that savior who saves by eliminating the law of the sword, abolishing the culture of violence and proclaiming oneness of humanity. This reinterpretation of the millenarian message is the essence of the first revelation received by Baha'u'llah through which Baha'i Faith was born.

While he was in Tehran Dungeon, in the year 1852, he received the divine word that "verily we render thee victorious by thyself and by thy pen." Thus loving character and pen, rather than the sword, became the means of victory of the Cause of God.

In Iran, this millenarian expectation took the form of waiting for the return of

the twelfth Imam or the Qa'im. The clerical definition of this event is predictably understood in terms of the sword, blood, hatred of non-Shi'ih and mass violence. It is no wonder that when the clerics who see themselves as representatives of the Hidden Imam are in charge of politics, the regulating principle of society becomes institutionalization of violence and discrimination.

However, the statements of Baha'u'llah in the Hidden Words was directly a reinterpretation of the concept of the twelfth Imam as well. This reinterpretation

is first elaborated in one of the early writings of the Bab who claimed to be the

awaited Qa'im himself. Yet, his explanation of the Qa'im is radically opposed

to traditional and clerical understanding of this issue.

In his work Commentary on Occultation Prayer (Sharhi Du'ayi Ghaybat) the Bab interprets a prayer that was written by Imam Sadiq known as the Occultation Prayer. This is a prayer that the Shi'is are asked to read so that the

return of the Twelfth Imam is hastened. It is a short prayer consisting of three

lines. The Bab interprets this prayer in an entirely new way. The essence of his

discussion is this: God in his primordial creation has created humans as perfect.

That is why in this primordial state of perfection prayer in the sense of asking

God to fulfill a need makes no sense. This perfect original creation of humans is

the true meaning of the birth of the Twelfth Imam. The Twelfth Imam refers to all human beings who are all created at birth noble and perfect. Yet humans by preoccupation with the material world forget their true spiritual identity and debase themselves as beasts and brutes. This new situation of degradation and reduction of humans to the level of jungle is metaphorically portrayed as the occultation of the Imam. It is at this stage that prayer becomes necessary.

Humans have to engage in prayer so that they remember their true spiritual identity and realize their own nobility. This is nothing but the return of the Imam and the reign of justice on earth. Prayer is defined by the Bab as a spiritual orientation that connects the finite to the infinite and a form of consciousness which discovers in the midst of the material world the shining sun of spirit. Suddenly, the entire concept of the Qa'im, his occultation and his

return becomes metaphorical statements about the existential human condition and an affirmation of the inherent human nobility. Baha'u'llah's word in Hidden

Words was exactly the same thing. God has created humans noble. Humans have abused themselves. Humans must look at their own truth to rediscover God standing within them. The second issue that needs reinterpretation is the

concepts of heaven, hell and the day of resurrection. The clerical understanding of heaven and hell is based upon a literal reading of the Qur'an which finds the day of resurrection to be the end of history. In this literal understanding, hell becomes the eternal house of torture where God loves to inflict eternal pain on humans who in their limited life have made some mistakes. This literal understanding unintentionally conveys the message that God is a sadist whose justice is nothing but sadistic torture for the sake of torture. It is not surprising that when clerics, who understand God and his justice in these ways, are in control of state the result is institutionalization of torture against almost everyone. No dignity, right or nobility of human being can be realized under such conceptions of God. Similarly, the literal reading of heaven by clerics indicates that the ultimate perfection and reward of human beings is to be completely immersed in physical and sexual pleasure. In other words, the idea of heaven becomes another reduction of humans to the level of beasts. It is no wonder that the desire for attaining physical pleasures of heaven is so frequently accompanied with a motivation to commit collective and indiscriminate violence in the name of God on other human beings. The writings of the Bab and Baha'u'llah give a radically different interpretation of these concepts. The Bab argued that heaven and hell apply not only to humans but to all beings. Everything has the right to realize its potentialities. This realization of potentialities is the paradise of that thing. Hell, on the other hand, is the state of deprivation of its perfections. So for example when humans are polluting the seas, the earth and the air and they are building hell on earth. Similarly, for human beings as image of God, heaven is realization of the spiritual potentialities of humans. Thus reduction of humans to the level of jungle, immersed in a culture of violence and intolerance, is the essence of hell. Paradise becomes the realization of the culture of human rights, culture of peace and culture of the oneness of humanity. Again, we can see that the statement of Baha'u'llah in the Hidden Words precisely unveils the meaning of hell and heaven. Heaven is the realization of true self-consciousness when humans discover God within themselves and thus find all human beings, regardless of their gender, race, religion, nationality, language or creed as sacred and beautiful. The third issue is the nature and dynamics of religion or revelation. The concept

of religion, revelation or divine word is usually understood in two opposite ways. The traditional clerical understanding of religion finds religion as a set of laws that is decided arbitrarily by a despotic will of God and without any connection to the dynamics of human development, needs or history. Religion is here absolutistic, irrational and ahistorical. That is why usually the clerics of each religion find their religion to be the last religion meaning that the laws of their religion must be binding eternally. In this understanding, religion becomes traditionalism, a debasement of humanity and a great obstacle against human development and progress. A clerical form of state herefore try to impose coercively and violently the laws that were relevant to thousands of years ago on modern conditions of humanity. Opposed to this perspective is the viewpoint of the materialist sociologists who consider revelation as a pure product of the culture of specific people in a specific stage of their development. Here religion is a purely human and social creation.

Baha'u'llah therefore redefines the concept of revelation. Religion is a product of the dialogue of God with humanity. It is defined by the will and word of God but this will or word is not arbitrary. Instead it takes a form that is compatible with the specific stage of human development, and therefore it is historically specific, changes over time, and is always oriented toward realization of human potentialities in an ever advancing civilization. In fact the traditional notion of covenant which is emphasized in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is in reality affirmation of this dialogue of God with humanity. The primordial covenant is not a social contract among humans. Rather it is a covenant between God and humanity. The very concept of covenant is already based on defining humans as the image of God, as noble spiritual beings and partners in the spiritual agreement between God and humans. Here humans are not passive objects, but active subjects endowed with consciousness and agency before God. In other words, religion, as a divine covenant, aims at realization of spiritual human perfections. Just as humans are historical beings and there is no end for such spiritual progress, religions are also dynamic, progressive and correspond to the needs of the time. This is again precisely the message of the Hidden Words that we have discussed before. Humans must find God within themselves, and this dialogue with God is the eternal path of the ceaseless process of human spiritual development. Thus religion instead of being an obstacle against human progress becomes the active force for such development.

In conclusion, the mystical nobility of humans must not only be translated in

the form of specific social laws and institutions that guarantee such nobility, it must also become cleansed from varieties of priestly misunderstandings of definition of God, religion and humanity as well.

#### D. From Prejudice to Fairness

As we noted, for Baha'u'llah the root cause of human debasement is a culture which forgets the spiritual dignity of humans and reduces humans to the level of jungle. In other words, the application of the law of struggle for existence to the realm of culture and social institutions is the ultimate source of human degradation and enslavement. Conversely, in Baha'i worldview, human freedom, an indispensable component of human dignity, is realized through the birth of humans as humans and transcending the culture of struggle for existence. 'Abdu'l-Baha has argued that true liberty and freedom is realized when humans develop their spiritual potentialities, transcend their captivity to nature and emerge as human beings. This freedom requires two conditions. First, through human reason we develop science and technology and become freed from the immediate control of our natural surroundings. This means that as 'Abdu'l-Baha says, we discover the laws of nature and through such knowledge overcome them. For example, humans are biologically incapable of flying. But through our science we build airplane and defy this natural limitation. However, this rationality is not sufficient for emancipation from the bondage of nature. In addition to this liberation from external nature we need to become free from our internal, moral and spiritual captivity to nature. This second condition is the same as liberation from captivity to the law of struggle for existence. By turning to a spiritual identity we discover our mutual interdependence with other human beings, discover the unity of humanity and see all humans as sacred, beautiful and endowed with rights. A culture of universal love, commitment to a code of universal human rights and dedication to the realization of the interests of the entire human race, peace and communication with all people are the result of such freedom. This is what 'Abdu'l-Baha says:

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is man's freedom, that through the ideal Power he should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world of nature; for as long as man is captive to nature he is a ferocious animal, as the struggle for existence is one of the exigencies of the world of nature. This matter of the struggle for existence is the fountain-head of all calamities and

is

the supreme affliction. (Selections 316)

Similarly, in one of his tablets Baha'u'llah argues that true liberty is attained

when humanity realizes that true honor and glory lies in loving the entire human race.

But Baha'i writings take this novel analysis of human freedom and dignity to yet a higher level. 'Abdu'l-Baha who defined human freedom as human transcendence from captivity to the Darwinian law of struggle for existence, argues that the equivalent of the principle of struggle for existence at the level

of human life is none other than various forms of prejudice. It is through prejudice that humans act like beasts and brutes. The ultimate source of all violence and oppression is now seen in prejudice, a form of culture which is regulated by the principle of struggle for existence. Thus realization of true freedom and attainment of a culture based upon human dignity is contingent on removal of all kinds of prejudice. 'Abdu'l-baha says: All prejudices are destructive of the human edifice. As long as these prejudices persist, the struggle for existence must remain dominant, and bloodthirstiness and rapacity continue. Therefore, even as was the case in the past, the world of humanity cannot be saved from the darkness of nature and cannot attain illumination except through the abandonment of prejudices and the acquisition of the morals of the Kingdom. (Selections 313) That is why elimination of all kinds of prejudice is so central to Baha'i teachings. The word translated as prejudice is

Ta'assub. It is important to realize that the concept discussed by Baha'u'llah

and 'Abdu'l-Baha is far more complex than the English word prejudice. Prejudice is a form of judgment which is incapable of seeing the truth in objective ways, and therefore sees the outsiders in negative ways. But the word ta'sassub not only conveys this notion of prejudice, it also explains the sociological source of this distorted judgment. Ta'assub is derived from the word usbah which means group. In other words, ta'assub is the process of individual's extreme identification with a particular group and therefore a failure to see other groups as equal. In this process of reduction of identity to

one group other human beings are either strangers or enemies. In this way the interests and needs of one's own group become sacred and moral whereas the interests and needs of other groups are completely ignored or rejected.

Therefore, ta'assub is the real source of dehumanization of other human beings,

a form of consciousness and value system in which struggle for existence becomes the operating principle of human relations.

It was in this context that Baha'u'llah defined human being as one whose identity is defined as a human being. A human being sees honor in terms of loving human race and is dedicated to the service of humankind. For

Baha'u'llah, this is a free human being:

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race... It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens. (Tablets 167)

It is in this context that Baha'i writings strongly and categorically reject racism,

patriarchy, militaristic nationalism, and religious fanaticism as destructive of

human nobility. For example, one cannot claim commitment to human dignity when he regards women as inferior and perceives other religious groups as dirty and subhuman. The case of religious prejudice and fanaticism is particularly intriguing. It is difficult for people to recognize that religious prejudice and

fanaticism is in fact a reduction of humans to the level of beastly nature. But this is precisely the insight offered by Baha'u'llah. All forms of prejudice are

affirmations of the struggle for existence and therefore they are all forms of a

materialistic and anti-spiritual worldview. That is why Baha'u'llah as the founder of a new religion consistently emphasized that religion must be a cause of unity and love, and that if it is a cause of discord and hatred it is better not to

have any religion. In Baha'u'llah's words, religious fanaticism is "a world-

devouring fire." (Epistle 13) To this complex sociological and philosophical analysis of human freedom and dignity, Baha'u'llah adds a final concept that is

essential to human liberation and dignity. This is the concept of fairness or *Insaf*, which is the application of justice at the level of individual thought and

judgment. Human freedom requires transcending from the culture of struggle for existence, which in turn is dependent on rejection of prejudice. But this prejudice is ultimately rooted in lack of fairness. Fairness, therefore, liberates

humans from the bondage of particularistic group prejudices and offers him the possibility to see the world of humanity as one. Fairness or justice is defined in

the Hidden Words as the most beloved of all things before God. This fairness is the precondition for independent investigation of truth. It requires casting away

all traditions and imitations, and vain imaginings. One has to doubt the truth of

the habitual ways of his tradition, prejudices of his culture and reliance on tyranny of religious leaders. In other words, fairness is an attitude of purification

of heart, of detachment from all but God, an orientation in which one looks at

the world with his own eyes and not through the eyes of his particular tribe. Baha'u'llah's writings usually begin with a discourse on the necessity of such

fairness. Both the Hidden Words and the Book of Certitude begin with such discussion. In other words, the first teaching of Baha'u'llah is independent

investigation of truth or fairness. It is the opposite of the culture of prejudice.

By looking at things through one's own eyes, one looks at reality in universalistic ways, that is, in the same way that God looks at things.

Returning

to the statement of Baha'u'llah in the Hidden Words, looking at oneself and finding God standing within is in fact a description of purification of heart or

fairness. Human nobility is dependent on turning away from prejudice and turning towards fairness. That is the meaning of Baha'u'llah's statement: The beginning of Humanness (insaniyyat) is fairness (insaf), and all things are contingent upon it. (author's translation)

In a striking passage in one of the last works of the Bab called Panj Sha'n, he

points to the relation between religious fairness and human freedom. Everyone knows that using violence and coercion to force people convert to a religion is opposed to human dignity and human freedom. That is why jihad and the law of the sword are removed from Baha'i Faith. Yet the Bab argues that in fact vast majority of people believe in a particular religion not because they have freely

selected that belief, rather because they were born within a family and society which advocates that religion. In other words, lack of independent investigation

of truth, or lack of fairness, namely a culture of imitation (taqlid) is the root

cause of people's religious identities. This means that religious identities are

still a matter of coercion and unfreedom.

It is in this context that we can understand the significance of

Baha'u'llah's

prayer in which he asks God "Confer fairness upon ecclesiastics and justice upon rulers." (author's translation) He is asking God to give fairness to the

leaders of culture and religion so that the hearts and minds of the people are liberated from prejudice and hatred. At the same time he wishes justice for the rulers so that social and political institutions would embody human dignity.

Therefore dignity of humans requires a culture of fairness which in turn leads to

a true human identity. It is curious that for we humans, our humanness or being a human is the most evident and immediate of all truths and yet, it is also the most concealed, distorted, and forgotten reality. Emerging from a culture of

jungle to the kingdom of spirit is in fact a process of discovery of the fact that we are first and foremost all human beings.

#### E. The Sacred Trinity of Human Dignity

No discussion of human dignity is possible without a general definition of human being. In this paper we discussed the viewpoint of Baha'u'llah in regard to human dignity. It is therefore necessary to conclude this analysis with a short discussion of Baha'u'llah's unique way of defining human beings. In a sense, the entire writings of Baha'u'llah can be viewed as a dialectical elaboration of his philosophy of human reality. In one of his writings he explicitly indicates that his writings have first addressed the mystics, then the divines, and then the kings and rulers of the world. This is indeed the ultimate description of the order and divisions of his writings. His earliest works in Baghdad are affirmations of the spiritual nature of reality. Here human beings are defined as a spiritual being. This discourse has much in common with the most noble mystic ideas in other religions including Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Humans are the throne of God, the image of God, the mirror of divine attributes and the dawning moment endowed with both angelic and brutish tendencies. The second stage of his writings affirms a new dimension of human reality. This often-neglected aspect is historical and dynamic character of human being. In the language of modern philosophy this is called historical consciousness. In Baha'i terminology this is designated as the principle of progressive revelation, a thesis which sees human reality as dynamic, progressive and historical, a fact which in turn necessitates the dynamic and progressive character of even divine word and revelation. Baha'u'llah emphasizes this second aspect of human reality in his writings which addressed the clerics. The reason is that the clerical worldview has always emphasized traditionalism and a static view of human reality. The difference between Baha'u'llah's logic and traditional viewpoint of the clerics is as wide as the distance of heaven and earth. For the clerics and even mystics, the word of God is absolute, eternal and unchanging. For them spirit is defined in terms of its opposition to change. For Baha'u'llah, on the contrary, the definition of humans as spirit means that humans are dynamic, progressive, historical, and ever-advancing. Spirit is opposed to nature. Nature is relatively stagnant. That is why the dogs and cats behave in different places and at

different times in similar ways. But spirit has no nature. It creates itself and constructs its universe. In its freedom and self-determination, spirit is defined by its creativity, dynamism, change and history. Baha'u'llah's first definition of humans as spiritual requires his second principle, the principle of historical consciousness.

The third and final stage of the writings of Baha'u'llah offers a third feature of human reality. This is the principle of global consciousness, the oneness of humanity and the universal solidarity of all human beings. Baha'u'llah emphasized this third principle in his writings that addressed humanity in general and the rulers of the earth in particular. In the past, social and political institutions of the world have been primarily based on the natural law of struggle for existence, the law of prejudice, and dehumanization of others. The time has come, however, to realize that all humans are brothers and sisters.

All humans must be perceived and treated as citizens of the republic of spirit where there is no discrimination, prejudice or hatred against other people on the basis of their natural, biological or imagined differences. In other words, a true understanding of human reality requires a realization of the unity of humankind and global cooperation and universal dignity of all human beings.

This third characteristic of humans is the logical conclusion of both previous principles. The first principle namely the spiritual definition of humans teaches us to realize that as image of God we are all one and the same. We cannot define human being as the image of God and then hate and kill each other on the basis of our biological differences, our place of birth on planet earth or religious superstitions and vain imaginings. But the principle of global consciousness is also the logical result of the second principle namely the idea of historical consciousness. If humans are historical and dynamic beings, then we need to understand that at this time the process of historical development have brought humanity to a new and global stage of development. In this global condition our mystical unity has become an objective material reality. In this stage no problem can be adequately solved except through a consciousness of universal brotherhood and sisterhood of all humanity and the imperative of global cooperation. Humans, in Baha'u'llah's words, need to regard the world as one interdependent and organic body. The age of particularistic prejudices, hatred, estrangement, discrimination and dehumanization is over. We need to be awakened by this spiritual enlightenment and reconstruct our world in ways that correspond to the requirement of time. In Baha'u'llah's view, human

dignity is

embodied in this definition of human being, a human being who is spiritual,  
historical and global.

— Baha'u'llah and Human Nobility (Used by permission of the curator)