



## 'Nature is God's Will' (1): viewpoints on environmental issues in the Bahá'í Faith

**Rebecca Vickers**

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Today, the negative impact that humanity has had, and continues to have, on Earth is regularly headline news. For Bahá'ís, the writings of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith, together with more recent position statements by local, national and international Bahá'í administrative bodies, provide information and guidance in dealing with the many complex, challenging and interconnected issues that make up the environmental debate.

### **Interdependency**

Central to any understanding of Bahá'í views on environmental issues is the Bahá'í approach to all aspects of life – a focus on oneness and interdependency. Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith wrote:

...even as the human body in this world, which is outwardly composed of different limbs and organs, is in reality a closely integrated, coherent identity, similarly the structure of the physical world is like unto a single being whose limbs and members are inseparably linked together. (2)

Therefore, while Bahá'ís applaud and support initiatives to address individual aspects of the environmental crisis, there is an underlying understanding in Bahá'í beliefs that only a holistic, global approach, based on the fundamental unity of mankind, offers long-term solutions. Bahá'u'lláh states, 'The well-being of mankind, its peace and security are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.' (3) To further this necessary unity of purpose, the Bahá'í writings specifically prescribe a new political order built around a world commonwealth of nations and an international parliament. At the core of this system are principles of consultation, economic justice, racial and sexual equality and universal education. As the Bahá'í International Community explains in its *Statement on Nature*:

The major issues facing the environmental movement today hinge on this point [of unity]. The problems of ocean pollution, the extinction of species, acid rain and deforestation – not to mention the ultimate scourge of nuclear war – respect no boundaries. All require a



transnational approach. (4)

In other words, Bahá'ís see the development of a unity of purpose and a common philosophy of life for all of humanity as the only true environmental safeguard.

### **Promotion of economic justice and sustainable development**

While philosophically the only answers to world problems, such as the environmental crisis, are concerted world responses, Bahá'ís also understand that practical measures, such as the eradication of the inequities between the Earth's rich and poor, are vital precursors to any successful attempts to protect the environment. The continued existence of poverty, hunger, the denial of equal rights and opportunities to women, and other economic and social injustices create tensions that have negative effects on efforts to protect the environment.

Throughout the world, individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities are instigating and participating in social and economic programmes, as well as projects that specifically focus on the environment. Many national and local Bahá'í communities have set up Environment Offices or similar organisations. These offices promote sustainable development and education, often in co-operation with groups that have similar principles and goals. Here are examples of a few recent environmental projects around the world in which Bahá'ís have been involved:

- The Bahá'í community in Cochabamba, Bolivia has developed solar altiplano greenhouses and has implemented this low-cost, environmentally friendly technology in several villages.
- The SR-2 solar radio, produced for the Vanguardia Trust by a Bahá'í (Dr Dean K Stevens) has contributed new technology to the field of solar-voltaic radio. Currently 10,000 SR-2s and the new model SR-4 have been produced.
- Internationally, Bahá'ís have initiated short- and long-term tree-planting programmes. Examples include the Breath of Life indigenous tree-planting project of the Bahá'ís of Hawaii, the reforestation efforts of the students of the Rabbani Bahá'í High School in Madhya Pradesh, India, village reforestation projects undertaken by Bahá'í students in Haiti and the campaign by Icelandic Bahá'ís to plant thousands of trees on Skógar, the ancestral property of the famous Icelandic poet Jochum M Eggertsson.

As well as these and hundreds of other specific initiatives, Bahá'í communities continue to be active each year in events to mark Earth Day and World Environment Day.

In the United Kingdom, the Bahá'í Association for Social and Economic Development (BASED-UK) supports and organises funding as necessary for social, economic and environmental projects throughout the world. This is undertaken in partnerships with national governments, international organisations and other interested religious and charitable bodies. It is worth stressing that the common operating principle which informs and directs Bahá'í development work is at all times to be participating in the empowerment of the peoples of the world, letting them take control of their own destiny. This is particularly important for those who are marginalised within society. Giving people a voice and decision-making capacity at the grassroots level means they can care for their environment in a way appropriate to their customs and needs.

Future prospects for Bahá'í involvement in environmental concerns will continue along the lines already established, including:

- education and training, particularly of the young, on conservation issues and practices;
- further projects, both individual and community-based, aimed at protecting and restoring the environment;
- advocacy for sustainable development and environmentally sound practices at the local, national and international level.



### **Respect for the Earth and all life on Earth**

As Bahá'ís believe that all the natural world is a reflection of the majesty and bounty of God, it is therefore incumbent upon Bahá'ís to respect and protect the Earth and the wonderful variety of life on Earth. The Bahá'í writings say:

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 this 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. (5)

So Bahá'ís, like all other people of faith, have an added impetus to protect and cherish the grandeur and diversity of the natural world, as it is seen as reflecting its creator. The Earth, and all that lives on it, is therefore seen by Bahá'ís as part of the divine trust and covenant between God and humankind. In the Bahá'í scriptures Bahá'u'lláh describes how the contemplation of nature creates an awareness of God:

...Every time I lift mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence. (6)

The Bahá'í scriptures also give great importance to the need to protect and show kindness to animals:

Look not upon the creatures of God except with the eye of kindliness and of mercy, for Our loving providence hath pervaded all created things, and Our grace encompassed the earth and heavens. (7)

Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. (8)

The Bahá'í approach to environmental issues is grounded in the Bahá'í view that men and women are spiritual beings living in the material world. It follows on from this holistic approach that rather than seeing environmental concerns as stand alone issues, Bahá'ís believe that problems relating to the Earth's ecology and the physical environment are inseparably intertwined with the spiritual welfare and physical well-being of individuals and the societies in which they live. The sickness of the human spirit is, therefore, directly linked to major threats to the world environment as the overemphasis on materialism and personal self-centredness hinders humankind's ability to work together as a global community.

Despite these perceived spiritual ills that inevitably reflect back on humankind's ability to deal with growing environmental problems, Bahá'ís also recognize a need for a fundamental shift away from negative and defeatist positions as regards the current crises. Bahá'ís continue to foster hope for the future, confident in the conviction that by following God's will for today, humanity can be transformed and a prosperous, sustainable world civilisation will emerge.



## Notes

- (1) The phrase in the title comes from the sentence 'Nature is God's Will and its expression in and throughout the contingent world.' From Bahá'u'lláh (1982) *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, p 142
- (2) 'Abdul'l-Bahá, quoted in *Huququ'llah* (1986) Thornhill, Ontario: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, p 21
- (3) Bahá'u'lláh(1978) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, p 285
- (4) Bahá'í International Community (2005) 'Statement on Nature' in *Nature: An Emanation of God's Will*. New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, p 42
- (5) Bahá'u'lláh(1979) *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, trans. Shoghi Effendi pocket ed., Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, p 44
- (6) Bahá'u'lláh (1978) *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá'u'lláh*, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, p 207
- (7) Bahá'u'lláh (1978) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, p 33
- (8) 'Abdul'l-Bahá (1982) *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdul'l-Baha*, Rev. ed. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, p 138

## Useful resources

- Arthur Lyon Dahl (1990) *Unless and Until: A Bahá'í Focus on the Environment*, London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust
- Nature: An Emanation of God's Will* (2005) New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust (a compilation of extracts from the Bahá'í writings, also includes the Bahá'í International Community *Statement on Nature*)
- Ecology: A Bahá'í View* (1999) Warwick: Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Warwick (pamphlet)
- Conservation of the Earth's Resources* (1990) London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust (compilation of extracts from the Bahá'í writings)
- A Perspective on the Environment* (1989) London: Bahá'í Information Office (pamphlet)

## Websites

- <http://www.bahai.org/>, the official website of the Bahá'í International Community, offering information about the Bahá'í Faith and its worldwide community to the general public, as well as to journalists, academics, and researchers.
- <http://info.bahai.org/>, *Bahá'í Topics*, an information resource including a brief introduction to the Bahá'í Faith, its teachings, history, and community activities, in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Persian, and Arabic.
- <http://reference.bahai.org/>, the Bahá'í Reference Library, containing downloadable versions of all the authoritative texts of the Bahá'í Faith in English, Persian and Arabic.
- <http://news.bahai.org/>, the Bahá'í World News Service, reporting on news, activities, and developments around the world.
- <http://statements.bahai.org/>, a collection of statements offering the Bahá'í perspective on contemporary issues and themes, submitted by the Bahá'í International Community to United Nations agencies and conferences.
- [www.bcca.org/ief](http://www.bcca.org/ief), the International Environment Forum, a Bahá'í-inspired initiative.
- [www.baseduk.org.uk](http://www.baseduk.org.uk), information about Bahá'í social and economic development projects (BASED-UK. 22<sup>nd</sup> East St. Helen Street, Abingdon OX14 5EB).

## Advice for RE teachers

Bahá'í Religious Education Agency (BREA). Burnlaw, Whitfield, Hexham, NE47 8HF, email: [brea@bahai.org.uk](mailto:brea@bahai.org.uk)



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