

The Value of Physical Existence for Essentially Spiritual Beings

Say: If ye be seekers after this life and the vanities thereof, ye should have sought them while ye were still enclosed in your mothers' wombs, for at that time ye were continually approaching them, could ye but perceive it. Ye have, on the other hand, ever since ye were born and attained maturity, been all the while receding from the world and drawing closer to dust. Why, then, exhibit such greed in amassing the treasures of the earth, when your days are numbered and your chance is well-nigh lost? Will ye not, then, O heedless ones, shake off your slumber?

—Bahá' u'lláh, *Gleanings*

Discovering the purpose of physical reality is possibly the most intriguing personal quest for anyone who has a belief in, or who wants to investigate the basis for a belief in, the existence of spiritual or metaphysical reality. Such a venture is especially challenging if one has come to believe that both physical and metaphysical aspects of reality have been created and organized by the design of a Divine Being, a Creator.

For those who follow the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith—and the teachings of various other world religions—discovering the purpose of physical reality is even more demanding because the Bahá'í scriptures assert that we human beings are essentially spiritual in nature and that all our “human” powers are actually powers and faculties of an essentially metaphysical reality—our soul.

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Certainly we as human beings do not find it difficult to enjoy and appreciate physical reality, regardless of our religious views or scientific thought. Most of us find the reverse true—that we get so caught up in and attached to delights of sensual pleasures and our apparently insatiable need to acquire and “possess” physical things that we can scarcely afford a moment’s leisure to meditate on matters of mind or spirit.

If we are judicious with our time, we may find a few moments now and then to reflect on the beauty of a flower, a landscape, a waterfall, a bird, a butterfly, or an occasional exotic beast. If we are more humanistic in our affections, we may delight in the recounting of noble deeds of heroes, in viewing great paintings or statuary, or in listening to the vast array of music that has emerged over time from so many different cultures. On a personal level, almost all of us have at one time or another experienced an overwhelming attraction to the physical aspect of another human being, what we sometimes allude to as the involuntary act of “falling in love”—a process most often followed sooner or later by what we consider to be the equally involuntary act of “falling out of love.”

THE PROBLEM WITH PHYSICAL REALITY

But if we have come to believe in the existence of a just and loving Creator, we may well want to spend some “quality time” pondering why, if this God could have created anything He wished, why “for God’s sake” did He decide it would be a good idea to fashion a creation that seems so persistently distracting and antithetical to any spiritual purposes? Furthermore, if physical reality is the product of such a Creator, why does this expression of reality seem so fraught with tribulation and injustice, so ostensibly devoid of inherent meaning or purpose, unless, somehow it is indeed “for God’s sake”?

Perhaps the more philosophical and deep-rooted concern we have as human beings examining the possibility of believing in a Divine Creator is this: If God has created us as essentially spiritual beings (human souls operating temporarily through the instrumentality of a physical organism), and if God has ordained that we are destined to continue our existence beyond this “mortal coil” as spiritual beings operating in a nonmaterial reality, then why did this omnipotent, omniscient, and loving Creator

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think it wise that we begin our eternal spiritual journey in an environment so contrary and confounding to all that He would have us become—namely, good or “Godly” individuals?

SOME FUNDAMENTAL RESPONSES

One justification for having us begin our eternal spiritual journey in a physical staging area—even if we are spirits operating through machines that inevitably deteriorate over time even with proper maintenance—is that our physical experience prepares us for birth into the next stage of our existence. In fact, if the Creator is loving and is also functioning in the capacity of a parent-teacher, we have to conclude that physical reality is not only *capable* of providing us with a foundational education, it necessarily provides the very *best* methodology that could possibly be devised.

And yet, even as a succession of horrible personal experiences erodes the naïve optimism of *Candide* in Voltaire’s work of the same name—a satire on the philosophy and theology of Leibniz that since the world was created by a Perfect Creator, this must be a perfect world—so must our own experience in this world cause us to question why injustice and imperfection seem to abound. Furthermore, if somehow we can accept that physical reality is a complex classroom geared to teaching us and preparing us for our eternal future, why do not all human beings have an equal chance to benefit from this earthly experience? What is more, if the physical-foundational part of our education happens only once, then what is the fate of those souls who pass on to that next stage of reality as small children, or who spend the physical portion of their lives trying to function and develop through a defective brain or body? Likewise, what is the spiritual destiny of those who are abused, neglected, malnourished, or otherwise prevented from properly benefiting from the spiritual lessons this physical education is fashioned to provide?

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The fundamental objective of the journey or “mind experiment” we are about to undertake is to approach these and other equally confounding issues about these apparently dual aspects of our reality so that by the

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end of our venture we can arrive at some conclusions that might prove practically useful for the time we have left in this formative and foundational stage of our development as human beings.

As we sally forth, we will use as primary guideposts passages from the authoritative writings of the Bahá'í Faith that seem to suggest solutions to the impediments that may block our passage from time to time. Our ultimate objective is to discover a bridge between what many believe to be two realities—one physical, the other metaphysical. Or if, during the course of our meandering we discover that reality is actually an inherently unified organism, then possibly we can figure out how the dual aspects of this single reality become bridged.

The method we will employ in our quest to discover the purpose of physical reality is similar to the process employed by Socrates in Plato's dialogue *The Republic*. After a lengthy and largely unsuccessful debate considering the various commonly held definitions of justice, Socrates suggests that they might succeed better were they first to define justice as it is manifest in society as a whole, and then, by analogy, see how these same attributes might help discover and define justice manifest in the individual. The basis for this method is his assertion that society is but a larger expression of the individual.

Employing this same analogical process, we will proceed to search for a bridge between spiritual and physical reality on two levels. Chapters 1 through 9 will examine this relationship "writ large" in the macrocosm—studying the theory that an essentially metaphysical being, a Creator, designed and fashioned physical reality for spiritual purposes. Chapters 10 through 16 will examine this relationship as it operates analogously at the microcosmic level—the theory that the human soul, also essentially spiritual in nature, employs an analogous process to run the physical body and direct the overall progress of our physical experience.

SOME IMPLICATIONS OF THIS STUDY

If we are successful in demonstrating that there are both a physical and a metaphysical aspect to reality and that there is a bridge between them, a number of important implications may follow. For instance, it

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may be that this connection or interpenetration occurs at various levels—at both the macrocosmic level of existence (the universe as a whole) and at the microcosmic level (the world of the individual self). For example, if we can demonstrate that there is an essentially spiritual God who effects creation and shapes human history, then clearly our understanding and interpretation of history would have to be completely revised, as would our understanding of cosmology and astrophysics. Likewise, if our own individual reality is essentially spiritual such that all our “human” faculties and powers (ideation, reason, will, consciousness, self-awareness, and memory) derive from metaphysical influence, then our understanding of our true nature and worth will be dramatically affected.

Stated succinctly, if there is interpenetration between physical and metaphysical aspects of reality, then science must in time consider the degree to which phenomenal events are affected and effected by non-physical causes. Conversely, those who avow belief in spiritual reality will have to consider the extent to which their spiritual condition is influenced by their daily regimen of physical activity (work, reflection, interaction with others, and so on).

A RATIONALE FOR EMPLOYING THE BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE

I am predisposed to compare theories about reality to those presented in the Bahá'í teachings because the very means by which I became a Bahá'í was to test rigorously the foundational tenets of the Bahá'í Faith with whatever questions I could conceive and then compare the solutions it offered to those of any other theological, philosophical, or scientific explanation I could discover. That was forty-five years ago, and I am still employing this same approach to my various ventures into the realm of creative investigation of reality, most especially about the nature of physical reality.

Though the Bahá'í Faith is known primarily for its assertion that the world's revealed religions are all part of a single systematic attempt on the part of a Divine Creator to instruct humanity, of particular relevance to the subject of this study is the Bahá'í axiom that there is no inherent contradiction between science and religion. This verity is not intended

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to imply that there aren't contradictions between individuals studying in these two areas of interest or between the theories about reality that they propose—the ongoing debates about such vital issues as the theory of evolution or the question of abortion are but two examples that suggest no reconciliation between science and religion seems imminent. Rather, the Bahá'í teachings affirm that all study of reality can be valid if pursued with the logical tools with which human beings have been endowed, particularly when these faculties are employed in a well-conceived regimen such as the so-called “scientific method”:

God has endowed man with intelligence and reason whereby he is required to determine the verity of questions and propositions. If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imaginations; for the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition.¹

But the validity of the Bahá'í claim about the legitimacy of studying reality from either a scientific or religious perspective is not dependent on the use of similar methodologies. It stems from the Bahá'í belief that reality itself is a unified and organic system with various dimensions that can be reasonably studied from myriad points of view. Of particular relevance to this enduring conflict between science and religion is the Bahá'í view that there are both physical and metaphysical properties to reality. Therefore over time all the different valid studies of reality will come to discover and recognize the legitimacy of each other because the soundness or truth of one branch of learning will no longer be seen to nullify the validity of others.

Another Bahá'í axiom relevant to this study asserts that observations about reality, however accurate or true they may be, can never be final or complete. Inasmuch as reality itself is infinitely complex, all knowledge of reality must necessarily always be only relatively true. This axiom proffers to the student of reality the promise of inexhaustible delight. What is more, since the Bahá'í teachings also affirm that because our conscious mind is a power of the spiritual essence that is our soul, this

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joy of study and discovery will persist in the continuation of our lives beyond the demise of our physical selves.

Akin to this revelation about the study of reality is what may well be the foremost principle espoused throughout the authoritative writings of the Bahá'í Faith—certainly it is the most foundational verity for this study—that reality has both physical and metaphysical properties, and, more to the point, that the physical properties of reality are the “outward” or sensually perceptible counterpart of the “inner” metaphysical properties of reality. By itself, this principle is not necessarily all that astounding—in some senses it might appear to be little more than a restatement of a form of Platonism. But coupled with this notion of a counterpart or metaphorical relationship between the physical and spiritual aspects of reality is the essential premise for all that we will discuss in the remainder of this discourse—that there is a prescribed, constant, and predictable interplay between these twin aspects of reality which, as the title of this work implies, requires a relentless bidirectional bridging of the gap between spiritual and physical reality.

Accordingly, the study of any part of reality from any perspective requires that we employ essentially the same tools of investigation. And since our quest here is to discover whether or not there are causal relationships between the metaphysical and physical aspects of reality, we might benefit as we proceed from considering statements by a system of belief or study which advocates that all observations and conclusions that do not employ scientific method are, by definition, tantamount to “superstitions and imaginations” and are, therefore, the “antithesis of knowledge.”

FUNDAMENTAL BACKGROUND TO THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

If we are going to pursue this subject from the perspective of the Bahá'í belief system, or at least by employing some of the methods and answers it suggests, it is essential that we prepare for our quest by considering some further background information about the Bahá'í Faith, its teachings and beliefs, that are particularly relevant to beliefs about the nature and purpose of physical reality. Much of this information will be apparent as we examine the relationship between the metaphysical and physical

expressions of reality, but foundational principles of Bahá'í beliefs set the stage for our venture.

Sometimes called the world's most racially integrated religion, the Bahá'í Faith is, according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, second only to Christianity in its diffusion of believers worldwide. Currently established in over 235 countries and comprising more than 5 million believers from 2,100 ethnic, racial, and tribal groups, the Bahá'í Faith is a world religion, not a cult, not a sect, not an offshoot of Islam or of any other religion. The Bahá'í Faith is neither synthetic nor syncretistic, but a world religion derived from the revealed teachings of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–92), its Prophet and Founder.*

At the heart of Bahá'í teachings is the belief—articulated throughout the writings of Bahá'u'lláh—that history is a spiritual dynamic proceeding according to progressive stages of guidance as revealed by God through the advent of divinely appointed Prophets or Messengers, whom Bahá'ís describe as Manifestations of God. These Manifestations, who appear approximately every five hundred to one thousand years, reveal in turn successively more complete descriptions of reality, together with updated laws and guidance for humankind. Their teachings provide governance that is meant to endure until the next Manifestation appears to advance further the systems that humankind must employ to foster an ever more spiritualized civilization—that is, a society run according to spiritual principles of justice, equity, freedom, education, and so forth.

From this perspective, all the world religions are viewed by Bahá'ís as one religion—the religion of God—revealed in progressively more complete expressions of knowledge and in evolving systems of governance to benefit the ever-advancing needs and capacities of humankind. Bahá'ís thus believe that all the world's revealed religions are united in origin and purpose and that all the peoples of the world are members of one human family, a family that is proceeding through ever more expansive stages of social relationship and order.

* Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic for “the Glory of God”) is the title bestowed on Mírzá Ḥusayn-'Alí, the son of a noble family from the district of Núr in the province of Mázindarán, Iran.

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Critical to the Bahá'í view of this process is the assertion that humankind on planet earth has at long last evolved into one global community. Therefore it is a central theme of the Bahá'í teachings that each person is a citizen of a world community and that the nations of the world are thus obliged to assist in constructing a global commonwealth to administer this newly emerged reality. Shoghi Effendi, the great-grandson of Bahá'u'lláh, has written, "Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving. Nation-building has come to an end."²

THE AUTHORITATIVE TEXTS OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The heart of the "sacred scriptures" of the Bahá'í Faith are the hundreds of volumes penned by Bahá'u'lláh, whom Bahá'ís consider to be the most recent, though not the last, Manifestation of God. One of the most weighty teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that human history is the chronicle of an "ever-advancing civilization."³ Thus there is no end point in history because humankind has the potential for infinite spiritual advancement, both in this world and in the afterlife, whether individually or collectively. For regardless how advanced we may become, we will never attain a state of absolute perfection, nor will we ever evolve to become anything other than a human soul, either in this life or in the afterlife.

Closely aligned with this concept of an ever-advancing civilization is the idea that there is an unrelenting and reciprocal relationship between belief and action, between faith and deeds. Bahá'u'lláh states emphatically in the preamble to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, His Most Holy Book, that it is not enough merely to recognize and accept the truth revealed by the Manifestations of God (such as Krishna, Abraham, Moses, Buddha, Zoroaster, Christ, Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh). To become spiritually transformed, one must combine the recognition of the most recent Manifestation of God with a daily regimen as prescribed by the Manifestation, such as prayer, meditation, study, work, and service to humanity.

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The other authoritative texts of the Bahá'í Faith are the works of the Báb (1819–50), the herald of Bahá'u'lláh and a Manifestation of God in His own right; the works of 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844–1921), the son and authoritative interpreter of the works of Bahá'u'lláh as well as head of the Bahá'í Faith as designated in the will of Bahá'u'lláh; the works of Shoghi Effendi (1887–1957), designated by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and authoritative interpreter of the Bahá'í texts; and finally the decisions and commentary of the Universal House of Justice, a body established by Bahá'u'lláh, defined further by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, discussed in depth by Shoghi Effendi, and first elected in 1963 at the first World Bahá'í Congress.*

FOUNDATIONAL BELIEFS OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith is often described succinctly as believing in three types of unity—the unity of God (there is only one Creator), the unity of religion (the foundation of all revealed religions is the same), and the unity of humankind (all people alike are the children of the same God).

At the heart of this concept is what Bahá'ís often term “progressive revelation,” the belief in a deity who is at once Creator and Prime Mover of the universe and yet simultaneously a “personal” God who is aware of and concerned with each and every human being. From this cosmological perspective, Bahá'ís do not assume that the earth is the unique creation on which human life has evolved. Essential to the Bahá'í concept of the Creator is the concept of timelessness and limitlessness with regard to both physical and metaphysical realities. Furthermore, inasmuch as the Bahá'í authoritative texts state that the “fruit” of creation is bringing forth human life and an ever-advancing (ever more spiritualized) human society, the Bahá'í teachings confirm that there has never existed a time when this process was not occurring somewhere in the created universe.

* Bahá'u'lláh appointed 'Abdu'l-Bahá to succeed Him as head of the Bahá'í Faith after His passing, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, prior to his own passing, appointed his eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi, to succeed him. Shortly after Shoghi Effendi's passing, the Bahá'í world community for the first time elected the Universal House of Justice, composed of nine Bahá'ís, as head of the religion.

THE MANIFESTATIONS OF GOD

The method by which the Creator as an essentially spiritual Being effects physical creation is empowering specialized beings—the Prophets or Manifestations of God—who function as intermediaries or “Vice-regents” for God. Ontologically, the Manifestations are not ordinary human beings who have been temporarily inspired. The Manifestation preexists in the realm of the spirit, is aware of His special station from the beginning of His consciousness when He assumes an associative relationship with a human temple or persona, and of His own free will undertakes His mission as intermediary and spiritual teacher.

The Manifestations acknowledge the validity of one another, articulate the same essential spiritual verities, and provide for those who live during Their dispensation (the period that Their religion is intended to endure) the means designated by God through which all human beings can discover the most propitious path to spiritual development and can fulfill their individual purposes in life.

Because They appear in a systematic progression, each Manifestation builds upon what the previous Prophet taught and prepares the way for the advent of the succeeding Prophet. Therefore, the Manifestation changes those laws of His predecessor that need to be updated, abrogates those that are no longer necessary, and introduces new laws as they become appropriate.

From this perspective, it is easy to understand that a major source of conflict among religions has been the fact that while spiritual concepts of religions may agree, specific laws are not always in accord. For example, Moses allowed divorce, Christ forbade it, and Muḥammad permitted it. And yet the source of the most grievous conflict as discussed by Bahá’u’lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Book of Certitude)* is to misinterpret scripture in such a way as to create a type of chauvinism whereby a given religion may decide that it possesses the one and only valid path to God.

Bahá’u’lláh observes that one frequent source of this misinterpretation is a literalist approach to metaphorical passages of scripture, an approach

* Work revealed by Bahá’u’lláh that lays out the basic theological principles of the Bahá’í Faith.

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that tempts religious authorities to take passages out of context and to misconstrue them as implying confusing or incorrect meanings.

THE SOUL AND THE AFTERLIFE

At the core of Bahá'í beliefs regarding the purpose of individual existence is the concept that the true reality of each individual is a spiritual essence, the soul. From the Bahá'í point of view, all distinctly human powers and faculties—such as reason, memory, imagination, will, and abstract thought—are but functions of the soul. Therefore the soul employs the physical capacities of the brain to channel ideas into physical action, but the soul is not *in* the body or *dependent on* the body for existence. Rather, the soul begins when it emanates from God to associate with the body at conception, though it endures infinitely beyond the body's deterioration and demise. To put it another way, the soul has a beginning, but it has no end.

However, the Bahá'í teachings explicitly deny the concepts of reincarnation (rebirth of the soul in another human body) and of metempsychosis (rebirth of the soul in the body of some other life form). The Bahá'í teachings also deny the belief in the afterlife as consisting of merely two possibilities—a heaven for those who have done well and a hell for those who have failed. Rather Bahá'u'lláh makes it clear that our physical existence is a period of preparation for our birth into a more expansive experience of reality, an experience in which reality will no longer be veiled or concealed in the guise of material forms.

In this sense, the afterlife is a continuation of the consciousness and identity that we have in this life. Yet, because the afterlife is a metaphysical or spiritual existence, the Manifestations admonish us to recognize and develop our spiritual faculties and capacities during our physical existence so that we will be prepared for the continuation of our existence, and the transition to this expanded reality will be felicitous and fruitful.

Bahá'u'lláh explains this relationship between these two parts of our existence by comparing our physical life to the gestation of the child in the womb of its mother. Every activity in that embryonic reality is geared to preparing the child for a productive and fruitful experience in a physical environment. In the same way, our lives in the physical world have the

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explicit purpose of preparing us for birth into the world of the spirit. The difference between these two experiences is that while we are in the womb, we have no conscious participation in our development, but we have free will in our physical lives to determine the extent to which we will become prepared for the transition to the afterlife and the continuation of our existence.

Therefore, while there is no physical heaven or physical hell in the Bahá'í belief system—since there is no physical reality for such places to exist—the Bahá'í texts state that there are explicit consequences to our actions in this life. We will never cease to exist or to remain human souls; our existence will always remain in a relative state of development. Consequently, if we ignore our opportunities and obligations in this life to prepare ourselves for our further development, we will experience remorse and regret when we evaluate our lives at the conclusion of our association with physical reality, as well as the existential sense of confusion and fear during our physical existence because we are not properly equipped to make propitious moral choices.

From this point of view, one can understand that the Bahá'í texts do not describe a specific point of spiritual development that would accord with some religious concepts of attaining “salvation.” If we are capable of infinite progress both in this life and in the afterlife, there can be no single point of development or accomplishment that could be designated as a point where we have completed our purpose to become ever more perfected, nor do we reach a point of progress in physical existence when regression is not also a possibility.

The central emphasis of the Bahá'í teachings, however, is that spiritual progress or forward motion is rewarding in and of itself, both in the physical experience and in the spiritual world. To progress spiritually is an inherently blissful and empowering experience without regard to what such progress may yield in terms of reward or escape from punishment.

BAHÁ'Í SOCIAL TEACHINGS AND THE AGE OF MATURITY

While all Manifestations have the same capacity and are regarded as equal in spiritual station, the Bahá'í writings state that the spiritual evolution or progress of human society, like the development of an

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individual, has certain milestones, certain turning points in the process of advancement. During what the Bahá'í writings allude to as the Adamic or Prophetic Cycle—the period of time from the appearance of Adam through the dispensation of Muḥammad (about six thousand years)—humankind on this planet was being prepared for a turning point at which time the generality of humankind would understand that the world is one community, that all human beings are equal in the sight of God, that all religions derive from the same sacred source, and that the purpose of human society is to create institutions and relationships that are based on spiritual principles.

This period, Bahá'ís believe, the period of the maturation of humankind, has at long last arrived. So it is that the Bahá'í teachings proclaim that the time foretold in all the world's religions as the time of the end, as the Last Days, as the Day of Resurrection, has arrived, but not as a dire conclusion to the story of humankind—as some religious leaders have interpreted these scriptures—but rather as the point of our true beginning. For the stage of maturity for any organic life is not a period of conclusion or finality, but the true beginning of the period for which the organism has been created. It is the time for the fruit tree to bring forth fruit, for the rosebush to bring forth roses, and for the human being to be considered an adult and, therefore, ready to accomplish those special tasks for which human beings have been brought forth into creation.

In keeping with this belief in the maturation of humanity, the laws and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh focus on the critical nature of this time in human history, particularly on the necessity for humankind to create a global commonwealth to bring about creative governance for a world that has “matured” because it has become contracted into a single unified community. Among the features of this global community, as discussed in the Bahá'í writings, are the creation of a world auxiliary language, a world currency, a world system of weights and measures, and a world police force to ensure the security and sovereignty of all the constituent members. On a more personal level, the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh regarding this commonwealth call for the adoption of laws and policies to ensure the equality of men and women, the unity of science and religion, the

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abolition of all forms of prejudice, the establishment of a world peace, the establishment of universal compulsory education, and the securing of all basic human rights.

Yet however vast, encompassing, and idealistic this vision of a world community might seem, the foundational structures for this society are the home and the community, the successful creation of which are dependent on the universal recognition that the law which binds together all creation is the law of love in all its myriad forms: “Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle, the unique power that bindeth together the divers elements of this material world, the supreme magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms.”⁵

It is in the context of these teachings and from my perspective as a Bahá’í that I undertake this attempt to respond to one of the most crucial personal issues one can deal with in coming to terms with any religious belief—the issue surrounding our proper relationship as essentially spiritual beings (human souls) with physical reality.