

***Faith and World Economy: A Joint Venture, a Bahá'í
Perspective, by Giuseppe Robiati:
Review by Sen McGlinn***

Author: Giuseppe Robiati

Translated by: Julio Savi

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It takes a very good book, or a very bad book, to move me to write a review. *Faith and World Economy* is one of the latter sort. Its beautiful presentation, and the supportive forward by Ervin Laszlo, encouraged me in the first place to read it. To say that I was disappointed would be an understatement: incredulity would be more accurate. Robiati proposes, for instance, a world system of wage regulation to ensure that work of a given kind is paid at the same rate the world over (p77), that 'economic differences among states can be eliminated through proper international legislation' (97), that moving manufacturing to low-wage areas is exploitation and speculation (and causes unemployment in Europe) (77), that the laws of supply and demand are iniquitous and can be replaced, (76, 78). He believes that multi-national corporations 'exert a nefarious influence' and describes capitalists, speculators, and trusts in terms which are not far removed from a full-blown conspiracy theory (pp 85 - 88). These examples are all taken from chapter 5, which is boldly entitled "An Economy for a New Age", but the flavour is unmistakable: this is 1930s socialism, a mixture of popular internationalism (a solidarity not extended to international businesses), a distrust (or worse) of capitalists, a reliance on legislative coercion and a willingness to interrupt trade in order to achieve economic justice, defined as economic equalization. Robiati would like to stop the world - not as it is, but as it was - and get off: "Everything around us is steadily speeding up, and it is hard for us to understand where we are going to end up". He does go on to show where he thinks we should end up, in a world which is peaceful, united, and just, but also cautious, conservative, and static.

The examples are sufficient to show that we will not find a new economic synthesis here and, in place of offering a joint venture between faith and economics, they are actually conceived as competing elements: "Whenever the rate of material life speeds up, spiritual growth slows down." Yet Robiati's approach is coherent, in terms of a fundamental philosophical approach which we can understand even if we do not share it, and his use of materialist, even mechanistic, models of the universe. To begin with the philosophical foundations. Robiati is a philosophical pessimist. One senses this in the first two chapters, which give a thoroughly apocalyptic vision of the present state of the world. This is a vision which is very big on holes, and not much interested in dough-nuts. "Inflation continues to grow, production levels decrease, unemployment increases, the perils of a nuclear war lurk closer and closer", "the working class is exploited in every corner of the world", youth are protesting, in the cities there is neurosis, psychosis, solitude, fear, pollution, heart disease, egotism, drug addiction and suicide. "All national health systems have long been proved inefficient", education is going to pot, the world's nations are clinging to ideas of national autonomy and economic development has reached a dead end. "One feels like withdrawing into one's home, locking the door, sitting down and crying desperately." Personally, it was not the door that I felt like closing, but the book, and what I want to cry desperately is "NO!": No, this grotesque distortion is

not the world of the 1990s, and NO!, this is not what we should be presenting as a 'Bahá'í Perspective'.

Some of the dark spots which Robiati describes, such as third world poverty and malnutrition, and international pollution, are not at all exaggerated. Others may perhaps be a matter of one's personal experience. I find the world he describes difficult to recognize, but perhaps some things look rather differently if one lives in Italy, and very differently if one lives in Mogadishu. A truly global vision might perhaps include a good deal more of the black and depressing than is visible from the relatively blessed corners of the world which I know. But a truly global vision would also have to include the very many signs of progress towards a new world order: the new and more humane theories of education and of social welfare, the gradual decline in protectionism and nationalism, the internationalization of the world's economy, progress towards world standards in currencies and in weights and measures, the electronic unification of the world, the spread of democracy and discrediting of racism and communism, the broad theoretical acceptance of the equality of men and women, and of the interdependence of capital and labour, and the rapidly increasing importance of institutions and arrangements which supersede the autonomy of the nation-state, as in the regional common markets, the world bank, and the UN.

Robiati's failure to perceive the positive trends which have appeared in the world - and whose first cause is, I would say, the coming of Bahá'u'lláh - dictates the apocalyptic character of the book. There is no description here of the process of change and development which leads us from one world to another. Rather, we have a stark description of a present disaster and progressive decay, and a sparse prescription of how things will be in the new world order as he envisions it, which we are left to understand will come about by some miraculous intervention. There cannot be any understanding of the process of change without a recognition of the constructive forces at work in the world, and thus of the continuity of the new world order with many aspects of what at present exists. If we compare our world with that of, say, the 1930s there are visible and significant changes in accordance with the direction marked out for us by Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bah and Shoghi Effendi. The economy of the new world order will, I believe, be an organic, adaptive growth from the 'best principles' of economic governance at present acknowledged, if but patchily applied, in the west. What is needed is not the wholesale renunciation of the healthy principles found thus far in favour of some system not yet articulated, but rather the application of economic principles at present applied intermittently or within the borders of nations or economic alliances, for their own benefit, to the whole world. To do so, in a determined and thorough way, requires in turn that we overcome the 'paralysis of will': that is, we have to see into and resolutely reject the foundations of pessimism which, as we will see, are to be found in those models of human behaviour which would condemn us to helplessly following the laws of the animal kingdom or, worse still, the laws of the kingdom of matter. The foundation of Robiati's pessimistic outlook appears in chapter 3, where he outlines what I have called philosophical pessimism. He believes that the thermodynamic law that energy and matter cannot be created or destroyed, along with the entropic principle of the tendency of the physical universe to 'run down' to a sameness which would make further processes impossible, are directly applicable to human affairs. The entropy, the loss of usable energy, is inevitable. Waste can never be fully recycled, perfect efficiency can never be achieved, but our goal can be to minimize the loss of energy, to slow the process as far as practicable, to limit our desires and our consumption. This is a restatement in the language of physics of a world-view which was already ancient before the Greeks gave it its classical stoic form. Robiati's stoic outlook is summed up nicely in the epitaph with which he closes the book: "The earth is but a heap of dust, let harmony reign over it",

Such a philosophical outlook would appear to fit less than easily with aspects of the Bahá'í Faith such as progressive revelation and the goal of 'an ever-advancing civilization', and it should be said that most Bahá'ís are, in my experience, fundamentally optimistic. But there is certainly room enough in the Bahá'í Faith for pessimists and optimists together. It is unfortunate that an author who is seeking a way out of our present situation should have chosen a model of the universe which focuses entirely on the physical sciences and omits the life sciences, for physical laws cannot offer any way out. According to physical law, every cause must have its effect, which in turn has its effect, and so the course of the universe, from first bang to the final uniform triumph of entropy, is absolutely predestined. I would suggest another model of the universe, in which the factor of Life is included as a countervailing, and stronger, force, a force directly opposed to entropy. Entropy would have the universe run down to the sameness and stillness of the 'heat death', Life works to the accumulation of ever higher levels of usable energy, to more and more differentiation and the resulting more and more complex forms of interaction and higher levels of action. It is in the life sciences, and not in the physical sciences, that we will find appropriate models and laws to describe the endless miraculous expansion which is the human destiny. The physical world offers us cause and effect, determinism, and despair. Indeed materialism and philosophical pessimism may be regarded as synonymous. The living world, thank God, sets this at defiance, lives and chooses and bends the causes to the effects it desires. When a plant takes low-energy, slightly differentiated minerals and water and high-energy, almost randomized, rays from the sun and produces not only itself, a highly differentiated, high-energy, intricately structured organism, but also seeds which miraculously will multiply more and more high-energy organisms which may even evolve to more intricate and differentiated structures, then the "Law of Entropy" has been banished to its proper place in the basement of the universe. When my cat, asleep in the shade, gets up to follow the sunlight to another spot and lies down again, another law of physics has been overcome, for an object at rest has, without external impulse, moved itself. And if the principle of the vegetable world, the spirit of growth, and the principle of the animal world, the spirit of movement, can perform these wonders why should we deny them to ourselves?

Robiati proposes an ideal of perfect balance, a low entropy (i.e., low-energy) society whose energies are focused on passing on what it has received, 'preserved, unaltered, and pure'. I propose an expansionary society, an ever-advancing society, a constantly changing society.

When mechanistic or thermodynamic laws are applied to economics, and combined with a purely material conception of wealth, the results are peculiar. Robiati says that economy is energy. Since energy cannot be created, the economic problem can be reduced to limiting energy use and redistributing wealth equitably. There is more than a small tinge here of the simplistic mechanical models which fatally flawed the Club of Rome report. Wealth clearly does not have this simple relation to matter and energy. In the first place the energy cost of material well-being is constantly being changed by technological factors. For instance, the development of micro-chips and other forms of miniaturization has radically lowered the energy cost of manufacturing many consumer items, without any corresponding reduction in the well-being derived from owning them. The economic cake is thus larger. If one took the number of radios and stereos owned around the world today, and multiplied it by the amount of copper in a 1960s radio, it would be discovered that the world must, as the Club of Rome predicted, be about to run out of copper. But this has not occurred, and very likely never will occur. It is not just that technology produces ever greater efficiency in the use of raw materials, but also that each generation of technology focuses on different materials: silicone and glass have replaced copper in circuitry, as aluminium replaced iron, oil replaced coal, coal replaced wood, and so on. Resource crises can and do occur, but we do not live like frogs in one small pond whose needs are determined by nature, and whose water and food resources are absolutely limited. We may encounter barriers to progress, shortages and problems which we find

we cannot go over, for there are physical laws which cannot be changed. But then we must simply think harder and go around. The only limits to our growth are within us.

Moreover economic well-being does not consist simply of material wealth. Education is an economic activity. So is opera. So is strip-mining. While there may be physical limits to the amount of some particular economic activities which our world can sustain, this does not imply a limit to economic activity and human well-being as a whole. It is a notable characteristic of more advanced economies that they shift their consumption patterns from material to non-material consumption, as witnessed for example by the steadily rising expenditure on education and health care in western economies.

This brings us to a crux in the application of Bahá'í principle to economics. Robiati says (37) that "more than a billion human beings live in conditions of absolute poverty and malnutrition ... this situation will remain unchanged as long as so called 'civilized' countries continue to consume more than 80% of the world's resources each year." Now if we were indeed living in a frog pond, the frog who is eating all the flies is leaving less for the rest. Robiati does not give any source or substantiation for his figures, but they would appear to refer to 80% of the world's GNP being produced, and largely consumed, in the west. As we have seen, much of this relates to non-material consumption (opera, education) which cannot be said to reduce the well-being of those in poorer countries at all. Another part relates to goods produced substantially with local renewable resources, such as most food production. Again this cannot be said to reduce the well-being of others, although we could well ask whether we might share rather more of this sort of production. Finally, there are goods produced and consumed in the west using renewable or non-renewable resources from poorer nations and vice versa. I swap you a wristwatch for a coir mat: who is now poorer? In principle one would have to say that since I wanted your mat (raw materials) and you wanted my watch (manufactured goods) we must both be richer.

Thus we cannot maintain that the relative wealth of one part of the world is the cause of poverty elsewhere. There may be particular trades which do cause poverty - which is to say, instances in which, through ignorance of true costs and values, or through political or economic powerlessness, the poorer countries sell their resources too cheaply - but this is quite different to the assumption that wealth in one place causes poverty elsewhere. The key principle here is justice, a principle which in the Bahá'í Writings does not mean that everyone should end up with more or less the same wealth, but which is related rather to the independent evaluation of truth. In *The Secret of Divine Civilization* we see 'Abdu'l-Bah repeatedly calling for justice in this sense, asking his readers to be fair in evaluating western science, technology, education, and political order. Now then, be fair: before the technological revolution almost 100% of the world's people were living 'in conditions of absolute poverty and malnutrition', leading lives which were short and distressed. After the technological revolution the people of the world, outside the 25% or so who live in affluence and ease, and the 25% or so who have at least a sufficiency, continue to live in conditions of absolute poverty, leading lives which are now somewhat longer but still distressed. It is very easy to jump on the anti-western, anti-industrialization bandwagon: the prejudices have become part of our cultural stock-in-trade, even in the west, but that is not justice.

We can demonstrate the falsity of the assumption in technical terms, and try ourselves and call on others to see with more justice, but if we wish to eradicate this natural - but erroneous - response we have to allow the wisdom of religions to do its transforming work. The religious principle involved is not particularly a Bahá'í principle, but rather a universal spiritual principle. Those who will take their Bibles in hand will find it beautifully stated in Matthew 20:1-16, the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. The metaphor used in the Bahá'í Writings is that of a family: the honour or well-

being of one member is a cause of rejoicing for all. These are the relations which must characterize the world community - to be combined of course with a familial sense of mutual care. When the notion that one person's wealth causes another's poverty is banished, the relations between peoples will no longer be based on outrage and envy on the one hand and fear and guilt on the other. When combined with the understanding that the laws of the physical universe do not impose any absolute limits on the total of human wealth and well-being, this will provide a sound foundation for constructive steps forward. This concludes my foundational criticism of the book. I have pointed out its deeply pessimistic colour, the basis of that pessimism in a materialistic model of the universe, and the economic corollary - logically derived from the false premise of materialism - that in a universe of strict limits the wealth of one causes the poverty of another. The paralysis of will which must be overcome if we are to take the steps required to put the new economic order into actual and global practice is dependent, to no small extent, on this complex of three interrelated errors.

Robiati raises another issue which must be grappled with as we try to look beyond the immediate need for good economic governance to a larger vision of what the new world order may eventually look like: the relationship of church and state, and of the institutions within the state. The Bahá'í Writings mandate, and give quite detailed prescriptions for, an elected Bahá'í administrative order, containing also appointed and hereditary elements, which culminates in the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice who are empowered respectively to interpret the Bahá'í Writings and to legislate for matters not contained in those Writings. This administrative system is presented as a pattern and model for the organization of the world. The Bahá'í Writings also mandate a world super-state, with an elected world legislature, a world executive and judiciary. The question arises of what the relationship between these two kinds of institutions should be. Robiati appears to assume that they are identical, inasmuch as he makes no differentiation, and uses (on page 80, for example) texts from the Bahá'í Writings which specifically refer to the Bahá'í institutions as support for his model of the civil institutions. Although I doubt that anyone is yet in a position to comprehensively describe the relationship, we can at least say that this is definitely incorrect. The Bahá'í Writings mandate a "world parliament whose members shall be elected by the people in their respective countries and whose election shall be confirmed by their respective governments" [Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p40], and a Universal House of Justice whose members are to be indirectly elected, by the members of the secondary Houses of Justice functioning as an electoral college [Bahá'í Administration, 1974 edition, p 84]. Moreover their taxation systems are to be different, in as much as the Bahá'í institutions are supported by a mixture of entirely voluntary donations and the Huququ'lláh (whose rate cannot be varied) while 'Abdu'l-Bah, in a tablet quoted by Robiati (pp134-5), has supported the principle of progressive income tax, while leaving the exact rates involved to local decisions. Moreover the legislative and executive functions are combined in the Bahá'í administration, both being carried out by the Universal House of Justice, a body of nine members in permanent session. The whole body of the elected representatives of the Bahá'í communities around the world are called together only to elect the Universal House of Justice. They may consult on the affairs of the world community, but they clearly form an electoral college and not a legislature. In these and other respects it is formally impossible to combine the Bahá'í administrative system and the Bahá'í conception of the world administrative system in a single structure.

Moreover the Bahá'í administrative order, considered as a model of world order, gives us reason to think that a separation of civil and religious orders may be a permanent and intended part of the world system. The unity of the Bahá'í administrative order is an organic rather than mechanical unity, it is not a pyramidal hierarchy but two permanently separated pyramids, the 'rulers' and the 'learned', each operating according to appropriate but different principles. At the top of these pyramids stand the Universal House of Justice and the Guardianship, described as 'twin

institutions', each with a sphere of authority in which it is supreme, each forbidden to 'infringe upon the prescribed domain of the other'. This principle of differentiation into separate institutions, each with its own appropriate nature, is carried down to the lower levels of the pyramids. In fact a pyramid is not an appropriate metaphor, since the principle of unity involved is not architectural but organic: the differentiated components need each other to fulfill their own nature, like the bone and muscle in a single body. This principle of differentiation and mutual dependence characterises the relation between the national convention and the national administrative body which it elects, and at the local level the relation between the feast and the LSA. A full description of all of the relationships is not necessary here: suffice to say that it works, that it is very far from a monolithic hierarchy, and that very many of the relationships are characterized by a principle of differentiation. If the Bahá'í administrative order is a model for the world order it is logical to expect the same principle to be reflected in a permanent separation of civil and religious orders, and this is indeed what we find in the Bahá'í Writings. Shoghi Effendi expresses it most succinctly in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p66: "Theirs is not the purpose, . . . to allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries." The more general principle is stated by Bahá'u'lláh in *Gleanings CXV*: "The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the Kings . . . That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts . . ."

History offers us a third reason for rejecting any simple combination of the secular and religious orders, since we see that progress from primitive social organisations at the level of the kinship group through successive levels of urbanisation and nation-building has been accompanied by a progressive differentiation of social functions: the priest, the warrior, the king, the blacksmith, and the herbalist leading to the marvelously differentiated interdependent structures of a nation. There is no apparent reason to suppose that the unity which is the goal of the Bahá'í movement should require the reversal of this trend.

Similar considerations apply to the relationships between the institutions of the civil order. Robiati presents a pyramidal structure: The Bahá'í writings speak indeed about a world legislature, a world executive, and a world tribunal, but they do not, so far as I am aware, specify this model of the relationship. Robiati at least does not give any source. Nor can it be derived by analogy from the Bahá'í administrative system, since, on the one hand, it does not reflect the principle of separate spheres which we find in the Bahá'í order, and on the other hand it has the legislature - the general gathering of elected representatives - having authority over the executive, whereas in the Bahá'í Administrative order, as we have seen, the executive also has the function of legislating, and the general gathering of the elected representatives has neither legislative nor executive power. The principles which we have seen above in relation to the separation of the religious and civil orders thus give us at least analogical reasons for distrusting this model of the world federal institutions. We should I think consider this still an open question. A model based on 'triplet institutions', with executive, legislature, and the world tribunal not subordinate one to the other but rather interdependent equals, remains a possibility.

What of the Bahá'í vision for the new world order at national and local levels? Robiati proposes the replication of the above model at each level: "each nation will have the same kind of national and local organization" (p80). Not only do I not find the model convincing, I do not find anything in the Bahá'í writings to suggest that every national and local unit should be organized on an identical pattern, and there are good reasons for thinking that it would not be desirable so far as the Bahá'í civil order goes. The first has to do with diversity: cultural diversity is to be preserved as inherently good, and one cannot remove an institution such as the monarchy from a nation's civil governing structure without also removing it, sooner or later, from the national culture. The second reason has

to do with the varying size of nations, in both geographical and population terms, which makes it advisable for some nations to have an internal federal structure. A third reason relates to the proposition that nations get the form of government which they deserve: that there are cultural reasons why canton democracy is appropriate to Switzerland, and absolute monarchy to Tonga. Finally we would have to point out that the idea of a nation state itself is not everywhere applicable. If, as Robiati proposes, each nation is to have the same kind of national organization, is this to be applied in the United Kingdom separately to the two nations of Scotland and England, or to the state of the United Kingdom?

The text which Robiati cites in support of his uniform government theory, from *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* pp 5-6, says that "the local as well as the international Houses of Justice have been expressly enjoined by the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* ... and that the method to be pursued for the election of the International and the National Houses of Justice has been set forth by ['Abdu'l-Bah] in His Will..." This hardly supports the conclusions which Robiati draws from it. I think that whatever model we may find for the federal institutions, it cannot be reapplied at lower levels in this fashion. The special situation and history and culture of each nation may require unique institutions. Let us not force them onto a Procrustean bed, of whatever model.