

Agriculture: A Fundamental Principle

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Abstract

Proper agricultural development is a “fundamental principle” conducive “to the advancement of mankind and to the reconstruction of the world” For this reason, Bahá'u'lláh instructs us to give “special regard” to agricultural development, but to a form of development shaped by and serving the goals of unity, justice, equity, and sustainability. The task of building a new social and economic order is associated with the redesign of food and agricultural systems, locally and internationally. A survey of the Bahá'í writings imparts vision of appropriate leading values for agriculture to ensure that development results in both ecological and economic viability. The survey further consider some of the implications for agriculture of the human/nature relationship, the role of women, the role of science and technology, and the relationship between globalism and local community development.

Résumé

Un bon développement agricole est un «principe fondamental» conduisant à «l'avancement de l'humanité et à la reconstruction do monde». C'est pourquoi Bahá'u'lláh nous exhorte à accorder une «attention particulière» au développement agricole, pourvu que ce soit une forme de développement façonnée par l'unité, la justice, l'équité et la durabilité et qui en serve le causes. Aussi bien au niveau local qu'international, la tâche de bâtir un nouve ordre social et économique est reliée à une nouvelle conception des système alimentaires et agricoles. Une vue globale des Écrits bahá'ís nous fournit une vision des principales valeurs applicabies à l'agriculture et pouvant garantir un développement qui soit à la fois écologiquement et économiquement viable. Cette étude examine comment l'agriculture peut être affectée par la relation entre l'homme et la nature, par le rôle des femmes, par celui de la science et de la technologie et par la relation entre globalisme et développement communautaire local.

Resumen

El debido desarrollo agrícola es un “principio fundamental” conducente “al avance de la humanidad y a la reconstrucción del mundo.” Por esta razón Bahá'u'lláh nos instruye dar consideración especial al desarrollo de la agricultura, pero a una forma de desarrollo moldeada por, y al servicio de las metas de la unidad, la justicia, la imparcialidad, y la sustentabilidad. La empresa de construir una orden económica y social nueva se asocia con el rediseñar de los sistemas de comestibles y de agricultura, localmente internacionalmente. Un reconocimiento de los escritos bahá'ís difunde una vision de las pautas apropiadas principales aplicables a la agricultura para asegurar que el fruto del desarrollo resulte ecológicamente y económicaenente viable. Mas aún, este reconocimiento toma en consideración el significado para la agricultura de la relación entre la naturaleza y los humanos, el rol de la mujer; el papel de la ciencia y la tecnología, y la relación entre el globalismo y el desarrollo comunitario local.

The vision of a “Peaceable Kingdom” has long been a compelling human aspiration that has generated rich literary and artistic expression, fueled secular ideologies, and pervaded faith and scripture. Usually, descriptions of an ideal future are replete with the bucolic imagery of agricultural bounty. This agrarian conception of God's Kingdom is eloquently voiced by Isaiah, whose prophecy anticipates the conflux of a future peace and an effective, just, and sustainable agriculture (Isaiah 2:4).

This prophetic theme is continued and developed in the Bahá'í writings. In the “Tablet of the World,” Bahá'u'lláh establishes the importance of agriculture and its leading role in his world order:

Whilst in the Prison of 'Akká, We revealed in the Crimson Book that which is conducive to the advancement of mankind and to the reconstruction of the world. The utterances set forth therein by the Pen of the Lord of creation include the following which constitute the fundamental principles for the administration of the affairs of men.... (*Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 89)

Bahá'u'lláh then enjoins promotion of the Lesser Peace by the Universal House of Justice; the reduction of all languages to a common one; the adherence to fellowship, kindness, and unity; and universal participation in a subsidy for education. His fifth fundamental principle is quoted in full:

...Special regard must be paid to agriculture. Although it hath been mentioned in the fifth place, unquestionably it precedeth the others. Agriculture is highly developed in foreign lands, however in Persia it hath so far been grievously neglected. It is hoped that His Majesty the Sháh—may God assist him by His grace—will turn his attention to this vital and important matter (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* 90)

In the context of the other statements in the Tablet, the powerful utterance about the precedence of agriculture seems to call for a broad definition of the term. It is more than farming; it is *agriculture* in the fullest sense, with economic, social, and spiritual connotations referring to the food and agriculture system as a whole. Further, Bahá'u'lláh's statements convince me that the development and maintenance of an effective agriculture will play a leading role in the process of peacemaking and that the outcome of this process will be an economy, society, and administrative order guided to a great extent by its agricultural priorities.

Aside from this emphatic statement, there are few specific references to agriculture in the Bahá'í writings. Nevertheless, the agriculturalist sees in the basic tenets of the Faith the preconditions of a successful agricultural development that is necessary if agriculture is to play its destined role in the future.

The Preconditions for Successful Agricultural Development

The Bahá'í approach to any major question is holistic, recognizing not only the integrity of the human species but also the coherence of the physical and spiritual dimensions of creation. To a Bahá'í, the starting point of human development is the placement of problems within this wider frame; no problem can be solved in isolation as none is isolated—the agricultural question is a prime example.

The animating, pivotal principle of the World Order envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh is unity. Three corollaries of this principle are universally applicable in building that world order: a new unity paradigm, the cohesion of practical and spiritual requirements, and a balance of personal and social responsibility. All greatly influence the analysis, interpretation, design, and method by which the component systems—especially agriculture—will be transformed.

A Unity Paradigm

The animating principle of unity has far-reaching applications. It causes us to alter our perception of ourselves, of our human relationships, and also of our relationship to nature. Recognizing our relatedness to nature results in a radical shift in our worldview: in the Bahá'í view, the theme of unity embracing the whole of creation becomes a paradigm for our age and the acceptance of the paradigm in the collective consciousness is key to both the development of peace and humankind/nature co-evolution.

The initial and most important stage in this paradigm is the acknowledgement of the unity of the human race. "...until the minds of men become united," says 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "no important matter can be accomplished" (*Bahá'í World Faith* 285). A penetrating appreciation of human unity is a potent medicine for society, in fact, says Bahá'u'lláh, "The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established" (*Gleanings* 286).

The success or failure of human endeavors depends very much on the question of unity. In relation to the agricultural theme, for example, our failure to ensure universal nourishment or to husband natural resources such as soil and forests adequately results not from any inadequacy of nature but from disunity manifest in unbridled nationalism, racism, classism, sexism, and religious animosity.

The illuminating light of unity can eclipse these divisive prejudices and can nurture human solidarity, the only foundation for peace and development. This milieu will not only rectify social relationships but also help to rectify our relationship to the earth whose resources, in the words of Shoghi Effendi, "dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind..." (*Call to the Nations* 56).

The Cohesion of Practical and Spiritual Requirements

The struggle of humanity toward the Kingdom of God on earth is a potent force for change. This ultimate reconstruction of the world implies the infusion of the spirit into every facet of our lives. The mission of Bahá'u'lláh is both to direct and to energize the realization of a peaceable, planetary order that is a cohesion of material and spiritual. "From the beginning of His stupendous mission," states the Universal House of Justice, "Bahá'u'lláh urged upon the attention of nations the necessity of ordering human affairs in such a way as to bring into being a world unified in all aspects of its life. In unnumbered verses and tablets He repeatedly and variously declared the 'progress of the world' and the 'development of nations' as being among the ordinances of God for this day. The oneness of mankind, which is at once the operating principle and the ultimate goal of His Revelation, implies the dynamic coherence between the spiritual and practical requirements of life on earth" (letter of Oct. 20, 1983).

Our civilization as a whole, however, is increasingly preoccupied with the material, to the exclusion of the spiritual. The gods of wealth and power have seduced us but left us deadened. As an enervating materialism invades every part of society, the possibility of there being a spiritual remedy to our ills remains outside our worldview. Recognition of the spiritual dimension in life is now a condition of continued material existence, just as the material requirements of living are conditions for the manifestation of the human spirit.

A salient feature of this radical conception of society is the broad acceptance of the coherence of material and spiritual requirements. This acceptance is a prerequisite for successful agricultural development.

The Balance of Personal and Social Responsibility

The transformational process succeeds to the extent that it resounds within the individual; the kingdom must be found within and brought out into the world. Personal and societal transformation are a harmonic pair; progress results from a new way of living individually and collectively. The guidance on transformational process offered by the Bahá'í Faith, in the words of the Universal House of Justice, “does not comprise a series of specific answers to current problems, but rather the illumination of an entirely new way of life. Without this way of life the problems are insoluble; with it they will either not arise, or if they arise, can be resolved (letter of July 21, 1968). The new way of life aims to bring out individual potential and ensure that our contribution—through our skills and labor, our organizational abilities, our efforts for education or science, or in whatever field of expertise—will render service.

Speaking of the role of the Faith in relation to the convergence of practical expertise and spiritual attainment, the Universal House of Justice observes that “as the Bahá'í Community grows it will require experts in numerous fields. As these experts bring their knowledge and skill to the service of the community, and even more, as they transform their various disciplines by bringing to bear upon them the light of the Divine Teachings, problem after problem now disrupting society will be answered” (letter of Aug. 21, 1977). For this reason a Bahá'í approach to development attaches great importance to the expansion of awareness and to the cultivation of virtues and conversely to the design and implementation of systems supportive to the attainment of spiritual maturity.

A spiritual orientation is the starting point in the transformational process in general and within each field of human endeavor. It is particularly pertinent to the study of agriculture because an effective agriculture is both fundamental to and cannot be attained separately from the greater struggle to achieve solidarity and world order.

Principles for Agricultural Development – A Survey of the Writings

The Position of Agriculture in a New World Order

Bahá'u'lláh's remarkable assertion that agriculture has priority over even the promotion of the Lesser Peace in establishing world order reinforces the essential connection of development and peace. His statement is further emphasized by 'Abdu'l-Bahá who said in his public talks concerning universal peace and order that “the fundamental basis of the community is agriculture” (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 217) and that “the peasant class and the agricultural class exceed other classes in the importance of their service” (*Foundations of World Unity* 39).

There are at least three reasons for the emphasis on agriculture as the foundation of social order. The first is obvious. Although we don't live by bread alone, each of us needs food first and foremost. Religion calls us to pay attention to what is essential as opposed to what is not. “Special regard” should be given to assuring that all have a diet sufficient to nourish full physical and mental well-being, in preference to what is the current economic imperative—production of armaments, consumer items, indulgences.

Second, everyone, not only the producer, has a high economic stake in the success of the agricultural system. Although, in industrial nations, as few as two percent of populations are engaged in farming, (*Production Yearbook*, vol. 35) as many as twenty-five percent work in the food and agricultural system in production and distribution of farm inputs and machinery, marketing, transportation, food sales and handling, advertising, finance, and so on. In Third World countries, most people are directly employed in farm work (*Production Yearbook*, vol. 35). Those that are not directly employed in the food industry, of course, allocate a sizeable portion of their income to food.

Third, food has a tremendous cultural significance. Our most basic human relationships—mother to baby, parent to child, gatherings of family and friends, national, religious, or ethnic feasts and festivals—involve nurturance through food. Conversely, because of the need to eat we can all understand and empathize with hunger. Food and agriculture, then, have a profound symbolic power that can be a unifying force.

Despite these three factors, which should establish food production at the center of social concern, our perception of the importance of agriculture has decreased as its capacity grows. The more farmers produce in excess of their own requirement—one producer can, with modern technology, provide for fifty people—the greater is the supply available for a population of non-producers. As people migrate to towns and cities, they can lose touch with the land

and develop attitudes unsympathetic to agriculture and farm people. They perceive cheap food to be a right but feel little responsibility for farm viability, farm prices, or resource conservation. Because they are the majority, their concerns prevail, and agriculture is impoverished.

The Bahá'í approach resolves the rural—urban split by emphasizing the centrality of agriculture for all of society, including urban people, as a matter of spiritual principle. In keeping with the theme of unity, the division between urban and rural is repaired as they become mutually supportive, a harmonic pair in an advocacy rather than antagonistic relationship: the rural nurtures the city, which in turn provides full support for a vital rural community. This strong support for agriculture, rural life, and respect for the producing class suggests that a new order would act to halt rural to urban migration and to maintain a large and healthy rural population.

Justice, Equity, and World Order

The major defect in the present world order is its inherent injustice and inequity in the personal, local, national, and international fronts. “Justice is, in this day, bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression. The thick clouds of tyranny have darkened the face of the earth, and enveloped its peoples” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 92).

Agriculture finds renewal only in the context of a world order animated by the guiding principles of justice and equity. These principles answer directly to the major shortcomings of the food system. Bahá'u'lláh says clearly that the implementation of justice in a New World Order is the key to satisfying material needs:

The light of men is Justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.... Were mankind to be adorned with this raiment, they would behold the day-star of the utterance, ‘On that day God will satisfy everyone out of His abundance,’ [cf. Qur’án 4:129] shining resplendent above the horizon of the world. Appreciate ye the value of this utterance (*Tablets* 66–67)

This utterance is the key to the design of a successful food system: “There can be no doubt whatever that if the daystar of justice, which the clouds of tyranny have obscured, were to shed its light upon men, the face of the earth would be completely transformed” (*Gleanings* 219).

‘Abdu'l-Bahá identifies tyranny—which might be defined in this context as the inequitable allocation of land and other food-producing resources in order to benefit a minority (individual, state, or corporate) at the expense of the majority—as responsible for much human misery: “When we see poverty allowed to reach a condition of starvation,” ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says, “it is a sure sign that somewhere we shall find tyranny” (*Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 141). Scarcity of food from underproduction, inadequate resources, overpopulation, the passivity of the poor, or a lack of technology (as is usually assumed) are not the causes of hunger. These are the symptoms of a tyrannical order.

Equity is parallel to justice. It is “the most fundamental among human virtues,” says Bahá'u'lláh. “The evaluation of all things must needs depend upon it” (*Bahá'í World Faith* 131). Equity as applied to agriculture might be defined as a fair sharing of production and, more important, of food-producing resources. The objective of agricultural policy must be, evaluated from the point of view of equity, not so much to increase production, but more to increase the inclusiveness of productivity and the sharing of production.

Globalism and Decentralism

At present, the world is already united through transnational systems of commerce, trade, communication, et cetera, but this unity is shaped by the ethics of power, profiteering, colonialism, and production based on exploitation of people and resources. The Writings call for the establishment of a just *world* community.

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth.... This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples.... The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated....

Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other will disappear. (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 203–4)

However, this concept of globalism

repudiates excessive centralization on one hand, and disclaims all attempts at uniformity on the other. Its watchword is unity in diversity.... (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 42)

Envisioned then is a planet united, not through coercion, imperialism, or excessive centralism, but as a cooperative commonwealth balanced by centralist and decentralist forces. This globalism is a requirement of a healthy food and agriculture system, unlike the current system which, although transnational in scope, is subject to exploitation that tends to undercut national and local self-reliance. The foundation of a Bahá'í commonwealth is the mature, self-reliant locality with a solid agrarian base.

Interdependence and Self-Reliance

Globalism and decentralism correspond to interdependence and self-reliance, the qualities required in building good order. The Writings suggest an economy based first on individual and family; local and national self-reliance paired with a sophisticated interdependence on the global, national, and local levels. To assist us in visualizing a Bahá'í social order, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses a number of organic, non-mechanical analogies—the family, the human body, a garden (cited in *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 42). His analogy of the household corresponds to the concept of *oikos* [Greek for household], the root of the words ecology and economy (*Foundations* 38–43). Ecology refers to the subtle relationships that unify organisms and the environment while securing a niche for its members, and economy in this context can refer to regulation and management of relationships to assure the well-being of both part and whole. In this analogy economics is seen as management of resources for the benefit of whole communities rather than as a struggle to capture wealth for individuals, a ruling class, or a state monopoly.

The Writings outline a new economic order in skeletal form. Economics is an indicator of spiritual conditions; thus the ultimate economic solution lies in spiritual transformation ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 238).

Although our vision must be world-embracing, the initial stage of economic reconstruction is at the local level, beginning with agricultural reform. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said the solution begins with the village, and when the village is reconstructed, then will the cities be also (*Selections* 279).

First and foremost is the principle that to all the members of the body politic shall be given the greatest achievements of the world of humanity. Each one shall have the utmost welfare and well-being. To solve this problem we must begin with the farmer; there will we lay a foundation for system and order because the peasant class and the agricultural class exceed other classes in the importance of their service. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations* 39)

Village reconstruction will involve the establishment of a central community institution, termed the “general storehouse” or “House of Finance,” directed by a democratically elected council of trustees responsible for the allocation of resources and services. The storehouse combines functions of economic regulation, lending, and social service. Its revenues come from a variety of taxes. Its first responsibility will be to stabilize the farm economy—should farm expenses exceed income, the farmer will be compensated, or if income exceeds expenses, the farmer will be taxed. After the farmer is taken care of, revenues will be expended in the care of the needy, followed by other necessary expenses. An excess of funds will be channeled upward to the national treasury, presumably to be allocated likewise within the community of communities.

While rudimentary, this scheme establishes principles needed in agricultural and community development: social responsibility for ensured productivity; democratic control and regulation of community resources, especially credit; community support for individual or collective initiatives. It provides a means of social regulation or trusteeship without imposition on entrepreneurship while enshrining the principle of community self-reliance at the foundation of mass economics (*Foundations* 37)

The need for equal access to resources and opportunities is the principle most often repeated in the Writings on economics. Extremes of wealth and destitution will be eliminated though degree will be retained. This will be enforced in part by legislation but will also depend on voluntary sharing (*Bahá'í Scriptures* 414). Profit sharing will have an important benefit for farm workers who will become “partners in every work” ('Abdu'l-Bahá quoted in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 145).

Bahá'u'lláh allows the charge of a reasonable rate of interest:

...it is lawful and proper to charge interest on money....

However, this is a matter that should be practised with moderation and fairness. Our Pen of Glory hath, as a token of wisdom and for the convenience of the people, desisted from laying down its limit. Nevertheless We exhort the loved ones of God to observe justice fairness, and to do that which would prompt the friends of God to evince tender mercy and compassion towards each other....

Nevertheless the conduct of these affairs hath been entrusted to the men of the House of Justice that they may enforce them according to the exigencies of the time and the dictates of wisdom. (*Tablets* 133–34)

This provision eases a major burden—high interest on debts—that now faces farmers worldwide and also encourages a more inclusive system of credit.

Ownership of the means of production and tenure of land will take a variety of forms. Private ownership is safeguarded, but other forms of initiative such as cooperative or village entrepreneurship are accepted. Gross accumulation of ownership will be completely eliminated. State ownership or control may have a role to play, but excessive centralization is warned against. Nevertheless, Bahá'í principles should not be confused with either capitalism or socialism. Entirely new systems, or those little used or known, may be employed. The designation of the House of Justice as trustee of resources perhaps suggests a concept of “trusterty” to complement the notion of property (as discussed in Swann, *The Community Land Trust*).

Instruction on inheritance recommends a wide dispersal of property within and also outside of the family of the deceased. This will also aid in limiting concentration of land ownership (Huddleston, *Bahá'í Studies Notebook*, 67–79).

Some characteristics of macroeconomics are indicated. There can be little doubt that provisions for redistribution of wealth will be carried forward to international relations. Equitable patterns of trade, finance, and production will mean a major change for food and agriculture systems that now bear a colonial pattern, which virtually assures poverty in the underdeveloped countries and the accumulation of wealth in the industrial world (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 203).

Science, Technology, and Moderation

Perhaps the most obvious feature of agriculture today is its growing mechanization. Farming increasingly copies the industrial model. The Bahá'í approach promotes modernization to the extent that the application of technology actually aids in the task of nourishing people while conserving resources for future generations. The adoption of modern technology, however, usually outpaces the development of the social technologies required to cope with the consequences of mechanization, causing dislocation of the farm population add an ever intensified stress on the resource base.

These problems are addressed in the Writings. Achieving a sustainable society is elevated to a central life purpose: “All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.” The implications for agriculture are far-reaching; poor husbandry is without parallel in its destructiveness of soil and forest, and an ethic that prioritizes conservation will drastically alter farm practice. Bahá'u'lláh states that one purpose of his laws is to protect the earth: “Each one of the ordinances We have revealed is a mighty stronghold for the preservation of the world of being” (*Tablets* 69). Shoghi Effendi, a supporter of conservation efforts, states that the tasks of “PROTECTION PHYSICAL WORLD AND HERITAGE FUTURE GENERATIONS. . . CONSTITUTES YET ANOTHER FORCE WORKING FOR PEACE AND BROTHERHOOD” (cable, May 23, 1951).

Foreseeing the potential consequences of the technical/scientific revolution, Bahá'u'lláh warned of its dangers and presented a principle of moderation that was to guide modernization:

The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation....

All other things are subject to this same principle of moderation. (*Gleanings* 342–43)

Further to this point, Bahá'u'lláh comments on the trend to Westernization. “In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil. Consider the civilization of the West, how it hath agitated and alarmed the peoples of the world” (*Tablets* 69). By way of explanation He projects a troubled vision of the dangers of unbridled development: “Strange and astonishing things exist in the earth but they are hidden from the minds and the understanding of men. These things are capable of changing the whole atmosphere of the earth and their contamination would prove lethal” (*Tablets* 69). Clearly, the unchecked development of modern

industrial agriculture, outward from the West, causes many of the most frightening side-effects of immoderate technology.

A Right Relationship to the Earth

To repeat, the Bahá'í approach suggests a new paradigm of unity embracing all of creation. The separateness of humankind from nature (which is rooted in the history of agriculture) must be reconsidered in this light. The Writings provide valuable insights on this complex problem, suggesting that a right relationship is threefold, involving attitudes of humility, unity, and detachment.

First, we are called upon to honor creation and to humble ourselves before it. The earth is itself a revelator of God: “Know thou that every created thing is a sign of the revelation of God” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 184). “Whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and the names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that Most Great Light” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 177). Again and again this theme of revelation through creation appears in the Writings: “No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it” (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 178). In this vein, we are also reminded of Bahá'u'lláh's love for and rapport with nature (Maxwell, *An Early Pilgrimage* 33–34).

Nature is a source, not only a physical source but also a spiritual source. Its ability to inspire is important to human spiritual attainment. We feel exhilarated and expanded by the vastness and profundity of the earth to which we belong. This attitude toward nature inspires humility—literally, being of the ground, *humus*—also part of a whole spirituality. Bahá'u'lláh calls on us to be humble to the earth:

Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 30)

Every man of discernment, while walking upon the earth, feeleth indeed abashed, inasmuch as he is fully aware that the thing which is the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power is, as ordained by God, the very earth which is trodden beneath the feet of all men. There can be no doubt that whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory. (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 44)

This attitude of humility not only is important to spirituality in itself but also underscores the requirement of conservation of nature in its wholeness.

Second, the essential unity of nature and humanity is implied through the unity principle. “Now concerning nature,” says ‘Abdu'l-Bahá,

it is but the essential properties and the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things. And though these infinite realities are diverse in their character yet they are in the utmost harmony and closely connected together. As one's vision is broadened and the matter observed carefully, it will be made certain that every reality is but an essential requisite of other realities. Thus to connect and harmonize these diverse and infinite realities an all-unifying Power is necessary, that every part of existent being may in perfect order discharge its own function. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 344)

The mineral, plant, and animal are actually seen as fully alive in that they possess a spirit. A mechanistic understanding of nature is therefore inadequate; more correct is a view of the earth as a whole, living organism.

While this concept resembles animism, it is more truly a balance of ancient wisdom and contemporary science. Bahá'u'lláh explains that it is wrong to assume that the Divine is incorporated in nature. “He is really a believer in the Unity of God who recognizeth in each and every created thing the sign of the revelation of Him Who is the Eternal Truth, and not he who maintaineth that the creature is indistinguishable from the Creator” (*Gleanings* 189). The world of God is unimaginably above and beyond creation.

The picture is completed as the world of the Manifestation is drawn into the image: “...all parts of the creational world are of one whole. All the parts are subordinate and obedient to the whole. The contingent beings are the branches of the tree of life while the Messenger of God is the root of that tree” (*Bahá'í World Faith* 364).

Although we are taught to honor and live harmoniously with the earth, we are also instructed to become detached from the physical world. While these views may at first seem contradictory, deeper reflection will aid us to realize that this understanding describes a multidimensionality in human nature—just as it is necessary to experience unity with physical creation, it is also necessary to reach beyond the material world in order to fulfill our destiny. We are given to understand that our planet, itself but a fragment of the material universe, which in turn is infinitesimal, is as nothing in relation to the cosmos, which is immeasurably vast, comprising limitless spiritual worlds. Identification

with and attachment to this small reality wrongly limits human potential, which though born from the earth, rightly belongs to the spiritual realm. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá discusses this concept of human freedom:

And among the teachings of His Holiness 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. (*Bahá’í World Faith* 288–89)

...the world of nature is an animal world. Until man is born again from the world of nature, that is to say, becomes detached from the world of nature, he is essentially an animal, and it is the teachings of God which converts [*sic*] this animal into a human soul. (*Bahá’í World Faith* 290)

To be empowered in building an appropriate relationship with nature (and this also depends on building human solidarity) we must become aware of and connected to the divine reality through the intermediary of the Manifestation. The new theology of the earth articulated in the Bahá’í writings, then, harmonizes elements of animalistic and revealed religion but overcomes an unbalanced concentration on either unity with or detachment from the natural world so conspicuous in most religious interpretations of the past and present.

Agriculture as Worship

The threefold relationship of humans to nature gives our work on the land a quality of worship. It demands a new approach to agriculture, which is the main meeting point of humanity and nature. The idea of agriculture as a form of worship is implied in the word *agri-culture*. *Agriculture* means literally the cultivation of fields, but behind the word *culture* is the Latin *cultus* and the Sanscrit *kwel*, which mean to dwell, to care, and to worship. From the word *agriculture*, we are led to a deeply religious concept, embedded in language, which has to do with agriculture implying dwelling on the land and caring for it as an act of worship (Rowe, *Home Place* 166).

The designation of work (and perhaps agricultural work especially due to its preeminent status) as worship is highly significant. “It is made incumbent on every one of you to engage in some one occupation, such as arts, trades, and the like. We have made this—your occupation—identical with the worship of God, the True One” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Bahá’í World Faith* 195). Writing to an agriculture student, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states:

Thy letter was received. Praise be to God it imparted the good news of thy health and safety and indicated that thou art ready to enter into an agricultural school. This is highly suitable. Strive as much as possible to become proficient in the science of agriculture for in accordance with the Divine Teachings, the acquisition of sciences and the perfection of arts is [*sic*] considered as acts of worship. If a man engages with all his power in the acquisition of a science or in the perfection of an art, it is as if he has been worshipping God in the churches and temples. Thus as thou enterest a school of agriculture and strivest in the acquisition of that science thou art day and night engaged in acts of worship—acts that are accepted at the threshold of the Almighty. What bounty greater than this that science should be considered as an act of worship and art as service to the Kingdom of God. (*Bahá’í World Faith* 377–78)

The understanding that our work is worship carries with it the responsibility of finding an appropriately caring quality in our endeavors. The Writings imply that the quality, motivation, and direction of our work affects its suitability as worship. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states: “...strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers” (*Paris Talks* 81). He says that “all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart [*sic*] is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people” (*Paris Talks* 176–77). Our work–worship becomes the more worthy to the extent that we assume our responsibility to the land and to each other by implementing sound husbandry in a just and sustainable food system.

The Role of Women

The important role that women play in agriculture is stressed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “Woman must especially devote her energies and abilities toward the industrial and agricultural sciences, seeking to assist mankind in that which is most needful. By this means she will demonstrate capability and ensure recognition of equality in the social and economic equation” (*Promulgation* 283).

Stress on woman's involvement, which has been reiterated by the Universal House of Justice, can be understood from three points, the first being that women are in fact the primary agricultural producers in much of the world. In Africa, for example, women are responsible for eighty percent of agricultural production. Is it not sensible, then, that development projects focus on women (rather than men and machines, as is often the case)?

A second point is that equal opportunity and responsibility in the agricultural field contributes to the struggle for sexual equality, which in itself is a precondition for the appearance of the Kingdom on earth. Education is an important avenue for advancing women in agriculture, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged women to attend agricultural college. The following quotation stresses again the importance of equality in educational opportunity and relates it to development and peace:

[Bahá'u'lláh] promulgated the adoption of the same course of education for man and woman. Daughters and sons must follow the same curriculum of study, thereby promoting unity of the sexes. When all mankind shall receive the same opportunity of education and the equality of men and women be realized, the foundations of war will be utterly destroyed. Without equality this will be impossible because all differences and distinctions are conducive to discord and strife. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 175)

A third point is that there is a need to stress the feminine principle in our relationship to the land and to each other; qualities of nurturance, intuition, empathy, caring, identification with forces of productivity and fruition, are those particularly understood by women. These are the qualities that we need to bring to agricultural work. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "it is well established in history that where woman has not participated in human affairs the outcomes have never attained a state of completion and perfection. On the other hand, every influential undertaking of the human world wherein woman has been a participant has attained importance" (*Promulgation* 134).

Exhortations and Prohibitions

A number of the exhortations and prohibitions found in the Bahá'í writings will have an effect on agriculture. 'Abdu'l-Bahá is adamant about the importance of kindness to animals (*Bahá'í World Faith* 373–74). This principle will have repercussions in the field of animal husbandry. His stern warning about the need for kindness even to the lower creatures will have further repercussions on all aspects of our interaction with ecosystems. May Maxwell's observations in this regard are interesting: "'Abdu'l-Bahá said that we should always be kind and merciful to every creature; that cruelty was sin and that the human race should never injure any of God's creatures, but ought to be always careful to do nothing to diminish or exterminate any order of living thing..." (Maxwell, *An Early Pilgrimage* 29). In this light we will have to redesign farm practices to avoid destruction of habitat and to reduce or eliminate practices that are destructive to animal organisms; this thinking is in keeping with ecological science, which recognizes the important role played by all levels of creatures in the functioning of whole systems.

In several talks and tablets 'Abdu'l-Bahá comments that "when mankind is more fully developed, the eating of meat will gradually cease" (*Promulgation* 171). The adoption of a lower meat content in our diet improves health as well as making more food available for human use—meat production is an inefficient use of protein, and about one half of all grain protein is fed to livestock. "...the Holy Books forbid the eating of any unclean thing, or the use of anything which is not pure" (*Bahá'í World Faith* 334). This calls into question the extensive and rapidly growing use of pesticides and the adulteration of natural foods in processing. Similarly, the prohibition on alcohol, opium, marijuana, and other narcotics, and the recommendation against tobacco will release resources for food production [Marijuana is surpassed only by corn as a cash crop in the United States] (Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith* 335). Speculation on land and agricultural commodities will be either moderated or eliminated in view of the Bahá'í injunction against gambling (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 47).

Conclusion

In summary, agricultural development is a "fundamental principle" for the advancement of humankind, linked to the establishment of the Lesser, and ultimately, the Most Great Peace. For this reason we are instructed to give "special regard" to agricultural development, more specifically to a form of development shaped by and serving the spiritual cause of unity, justice, and equity. The task of building a new social and economic order is associated with the redesign of agriculture to ensure economic viability for producers in self-reliant communities, which are vital cells in a global organism founded on cooperative interdependence. We are asked to bring a spiritual sense to our agricultural work, to elevate it to a form of worship, and in the process to transform our inner lives in correspondence to God's Will revealed in nature and Word. We are asked to conduct our lives individually and collectively in such fashion as to ensure a sustainable society by balancing technical and spiritual development. We

are given a vision of our relatedness to the earth but called to an inspired station where we are empowered to take full responsibility in carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization.

In this view, agriculture is elevated from mere commerce to a spiritual way of living. In the words of the noted Japanese farmer Masanobu Fukuoka, “the ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops, but the cultivation and perfection of human beings” (*One Straw Revolution* xii).

How can we aid in this transformation? We can make whatever effort possible to allow the creative influence of the Spirit to inform our thought, feeling, and action, paying full attention to the consequences of what we do as we share in the bounty of the earth and the work on the land. The task of agricultural development cannot be carried out in isolation from the process of spiritual evolvment, recognizing, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says, that “when the love of God is established, everything else will be realized” (*Promulgation* 239).

As we witness the failure of agriculture to meet even the basic need of the people for nourishment and watch the continued decline of soil and other resources for production, we can avoid despair and paralysis by remembering that the destiny that we have been promised is approaching and that while it may seem impossible in any significant way to alleviate the growing suffering of humanity “...thanks to the unfailing grace of God, the loving-kindness of His favored ones, the unrivaled endeavors of wise and capable souls, and the thoughts and ideas of the peerless leaders of this age, nothing whatsoever can be regarded as unattainable” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* 38).

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