

## **Bahá'í Cosmological Symbolism and the Ecofeminist Critique**

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### ***Abstract***

*This article* is composed of three parts. The first part documents the constituents of Bahá'í cosmological symbolism—such as dualism, theism, and redemptive history. By “cosmological symbolism” is here meant a system of symbols used to portray the origin, nature, and existence of the cosmos. As will be shown, the most immediate antecedents of Bahá'í cosmological symbolism are various biblical texts (most elements can be observed in the Book of Genesis alone and often as mediated through the Qur'án). Biblical cosmological symbolism—especially those aspects that relate to dualistic theism—has been criticized severely by some feminists and environmentalists, and their arguments can also be applied to Bahá'í cosmology. The second part of this article provides a brief introduction to the main feminist/environmentalist arguments. The third part summarizes and examines the eschatological character of Bahá'í cosmological symbolism since Bahá'í eschatology provides answers to many feminist and ecological objections.

### ***Résumé***

Le présent article est constitué de trois parties. La première partie documente les éléments du symbolisme cosmologique bahá'í, tel le dualisme, le théisme et l'histoire rédemptrice. Ce que signifie ici «le symbolisme cosmologique» est un système de symboles utilisé pour représenter l'origine, la nature et l'existence du cosmos. L'article démontrera que les antécédents les plus récents du symbolisme cosmologique Bahá'í existent dans divers textes bibliques (dont la plupart des éléments se retrouvent dans le Livre de la Genèse et souvent modifié à travers le Qur'án). Le symbolisme cosmologique biblique—en particulier les aspects ayant trait au théisme dualiste—a été sévèrement critiqué par certains penseurs féministes et environnementalistes, dont les arguments peuvent aussi s'appliquer à la cosmologie bahá'ie. Aussi, la deuxième partie de l'article introduit brièvement les principaux arguments féministes et environnementaux. La troisième partie résume et examine le caractère eschatologique du symbolisme cosmologique bahá'í depuis que l'eschatologie bahá'ie offre des réponses à nombres d'objections sur le plan féministe et écologique.

### ***Resumen***

Esta disertación se compone de tres partes. La primera parte documenta los componentes del simbolismo cosmológico bahá'í—tal como el dualismo, el teísmo y la historia redentora. Por “simbolismo cosmológico” se entiende un sistema de símbolos utilizados para representar el origen, naturaleza, y existencia del cosmos. Como se demostrara, los antecedentes mas próximos del simbolismo cosmológico bahá'í son varios de los textos bíblicos (la mayor parte de estos elementos pueden ser observados en el Libro de Genesis y frecuentemente por media del Corán). El simbolismo cosmológico bíblico, especialmente aquellos aspectos que se refieren al teísmo dualístico, ha sido fuertemente criticado por feministas y ambientalistas y por lo tanto sus razonamientos pueden aplicarse a la cosmología bahá'í. La segunda parte del artículo nos da una breve presentación de los razonamientos principales de los ambientalistas feministas. La tercera

parte hace resumen y examina el carácter escatológico del simbolismo cosmológico bahá'í ya que la escatología bahá'í da respuesta a muchos de los reparos ecológicos y feministas.

## Cosmology and Symbolism

*Cosmology*<sup>1</sup> is a term that refers to the theory of the universe, its origins, nature, ordering, and existence. Every religion has traditions, rituals, or sacred writings that bear upon the question of cosmology, and there are compelling reasons to view such ancient cosmologies, like that presented in the Book of Genesis, as more than primitive attempts to record the origin or catalogue the physical structure of the universe. Such cosmologies incorporate and give central attention to the sacred and the question of life's meaning and purpose. Unfolding events in religious history are often spoken of by way of this cosmological symbolism in order to reveal the significance of such events. The recollection of cosmological symbolism allows a religious community to relate its present experience in history (contingent time) to the realm of the sacred, which stands beyond both time and place.

Like a modern scientist, an ancient observer could have attempted to describe the physical universe simply as it appeared. It is clear, however, that this was never the aim of ancient cosmologies. The sacred, the ultimate ground of being, humankind's relationship to the inmost reality of realities, is the concern around which cosmographic details and human existence are interpreted. Viewed in this way, a distinction can be made between secular and sacred cosmology. Sacred cosmology can be understood as a set of beliefs (or teachings) or interpretations that take into consideration the question of divinity—it is not a detached, materialistic description of the cosmos as it exists, but an account of the perceived or given meaning of the cosmos. Philosophical and religious content is joined with empirical observation to form a cosmological vision.

This perspective can, however, be taken a step further. It is possible that in scripture, perceptions about cosmography and existing cosmological beliefs are used symbolically or simply as vehicles of meaning. That is, the purpose of scripture may not be so much the spiritual *interpretation* of the physical cosmos, but rather the *use* of such perceptions about the cosmos to communicate beliefs or evoke responses. This can be understood as a symbolic or metaphorical use of reality. Purpose and ethical content in the biblical Genesis narrative, for example, is so dominant that any possible objective value of its cosmography becomes relatively lost.

At the time when Bahá'í scripture was being composed (late nineteenth century and early twentieth century), ancient cosmology had survived in the world's great religious traditions, but its correspondence to physical reality was being challenged by new ideas and discoveries—a trend that challenged literal interpretations and strengthened the tendency to view scripture symbolically. In the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the symbolic nature of scripture is openly stated. Bahá'í scripture, however, goes a step further than the affirmation of symbolism in scripture; it at times denies that certain cosmographical and cosmogonic elements have objective material reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for example, denies that “heaven” has a geographical and spatial reality and that the story of Adam and Eve can be fixed to chronological time.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The term *cosmology* is from the Greek word *cosmos*, meaning the world, creation, or universe. In the context of this article, the term *cosmology* is also used to encompass both *cosmogony* (the origins of the cosmos) and *cosmography* (the construction and form of the cosmos), in the same way that biblical cosmology encompasses both cosmogony and cosmography.

<sup>2</sup> See 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 103, 122–26.

Nevertheless, Bahá'í scripture is characterized by a prevalent use of ancient cosmological symbolism, often appearing without any explanation or indication of its symbolic nature. Symbols such as heaven, Satan, celestial maidens, and the primal garden of Adam and Eve are used without qualification (in their immediate context), presumably because they have psychological, didactic, and aesthetic value; that is, they remain an effective means for evoking ethical responses; they are an effective way of communicating spiritual teachings; they suggest continuity with past religious history; and they lend poetic expression to the message. In the Book of Genesis, the details of the cosmos as they appeared to the observer were incorporated into an ethical narrative, the intention of which, it can be argued, was to evoke a response that would enhance human well-being and lead to liberation. From this point of view, cosmological symbolism serves a purpose, and this purpose is what is most important. As with all symbols, what is most significant is not the symbol itself but that to which it points or the response it seeks to evoke. In our own age, Bahá'í scripture appears to continue to build on and develop this same tradition of sacred cosmology.

### The Origin and Nature of Bahá'í Cosmology

In Bahá'í sacred literature there is no one text that contains a detailed cosmogonic myth. Nevertheless, the available literature indicates that Bahá'í scripture follows or tends to use symbolism that corresponds to biblical cosmology, including the cosmogonic myth of Genesis. The story of creation found in the Bible (Gen. 1:1–25) is not repeated in later Christian, quranic,<sup>3</sup> or Bahá'í scriptures,<sup>4</sup> but many of the essential and key symbols of ancient Hebrew cosmology are carried over and in some cases elaborated. If, for example, the cosmological symbolism from the New Testament, the Qur'án, or Bahá'í scriptures is viewed together, it is apparent that all the essential symbolic elements can be observed in the Hebrew scriptures—most, in fact, can be found in the Book of Genesis alone. Some of the main features of the Genesis cosmology are:

**Duality:** In Genesis there is one God who created the cosmos. Creation and God are separate, creation originating from an act or acts of God. Human beings and all living creatures form a part of God's creation. In Bahá'í scripture, there is also one God—transcendent, immanent, and personal—who created the cosmos and is separate from it (see, for example, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 98–99). A type of duality between matter and spirit can also be inferred from the symbolism of God making the human form out of clay (matter) and God then breathing breath (spirit/soul) into it to give it life.<sup>5</sup>

**Hierarchies:** In Genesis the cosmos is a multilayered hierarchy in which there is a further hierarchy of created beings. That is, there is the earth, the waters of the deep or abyss below (Gen. 1:7, 9, 20), and above the earth is the firmament or heavens. A further hierarchy is established with regard to living creatures and beings. Animals, humans, “angels of God”<sup>6</sup> (see, for example, Gen. 16:7, 19:1), cherubim (Gen. 3:24), and God are mentioned in

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<sup>3</sup> There are, however, certain significant parallels among Islamic traditions. In the opening verse of Genesis the text reads, “and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters” (Gen. 1: 2, trans. American Jewish Version). An Islamic tradition states that “when Allah desired to create the earths He ordered the wind to blow the waters so that one part was dashing against another” (Arthur Jeffery, ed., *A Reader on Islam* 164).

<sup>4</sup> These observations are based on the available texts translated into English.

<sup>5</sup> Among other things, this symbolic distinction between matter and spirit may be intended to imply that the contingency of the material form is not a threat to the immortality of the spirit/soul.

<sup>6</sup> The “snake” seems to represent Satan, a fallen angel, but the term “Satan” is not used in Genesis, nor is his place in biblical mythology clearly delineated.

Genesis, but no clear doctrine of hierarchy is explicitly formulated. It is, however, evident that humans are created in the “image” of God and as such, are to be masters over creation. God, as creator and judge, however, occupies the distinction of “Most High,” a status that is stated later in the text (Gen. 14: 18–20, 22). Despite some ambiguities, the opening chapters provide a sufficient framework to establish a type of hierarchal cosmology that positions humans in a station over other creatures but under God. These features have direct implications for human self-perception, giving confidence for self-exertion in the world (as opposed to resignation and submission to hostile natural forces) as well as humility before an ultimate reality that is sacred and divine, transcendent and immanent.

In Bahá’í scripture there are also multiple hierarchic worlds and/or planes and a hierarchy of beings that includes celestial beings (see, for example, Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*: “the inmates of the celestial Pavilion,” 11–12; also 108, 136, 192; and “invisible angels” 309; also 16, 45, 125, 139, 277, 295) and the superiority of humans in the order of earthly creation. Speaking symbolically, God transcends the limitations of human existence and is also said to have “His true habitation in the realms above” (*Gleanings* 26; see also 75, 91, 116, 151, 185, 188, 193, 220, 263). This hierarchy does not deny the interconnectedness or interdependence of creatures and the environment on earth; it simply defines a context in which humans can view themselves within the whole.

**A Divine Order:** In Genesis the original creation is good, and within this creation (on earth) there is a primal paradise (Gen. 1:10, 12, 21, 25; 2:9). The original order in creation is based on adherence to God’s will or decree expressed in the primal command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of good and evil (Gen. 2: 17). This decree, however, is breached by the desires of human beings, and through this disobedience conditions enter the cosmos that cause human suffering (Gen. chap. 3). In this way the primal order held out the reward of continuing paradise for obedience to the divine law, and punishment (expulsion into a world of enmity) for disobedience. Similarly, in Bahá’í scripture “the basis of world order” is established on the “twin principles” of reward and punishment (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 66; see also 126, 164). There is also the pervasive dependence on God for the cosmic order and the progress and well-being of humankind (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 68, 190).

**Theism:** In Genesis, after the breach in the primal order occurs, God nevertheless intervenes to assist humankind. That is, God periodically communicates his will to and makes covenants for humankind through select human beings so that human suffering can be mitigated and humankind can advance toward a better future—a future that would become in later biblical eschatology, a renewal of paradise (Rev. 21). Similarly, in Bahá’í scripture chosen individuals are said to act as intermediaries between God and creation (in Bahá’í terminology, the Manifestations of God; see *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 4–18, 98–104). They appear successively in order to advance the progress of the human soul and collectively, all humanity toward the eschatological goal.

**Purpose and Unity:** Genesis seems to indicate that the purpose of humankind is to live in close communion with God and to fulfill an inherent role as image and representative of God in creation. In the original paradise, and in many instances following the “fall,” human beings are to act as responsible stewards of the environment and animal kingdom. In Bahá’í scripture, the purpose of humankind is to know and worship God, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization (an objective that also involves acting as responsible stewards of creation). The Genesis myth also has the important message of human unity: that is, all human beings are made of the same substance and originate from the same parents. ‘Abdu’l-

Bahá is recorded as having used the Genesis myth to argue for human unity, “Concerning the prejudice of race: it is an illusion, a superstition pure and simple! For God created us all of one race. There were no differences in the beginning, for we are all descendants of Adam. In the beginning, also, there were no limits and boundaries between the different lands; no part of the earth belonged more to one people than to another” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 148; see also, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá *Promulgation* 174, 190, 229, 354, 426).

As outlined above, Genesis cosmology is part of a narrative of events that can be understood as explaining why things occur as they do and what is the purpose and role of humankind in the created order. It is possible to view the cosmology as treating both the origin and structure of the material cosmos, but the central subject is the question of the condition, potential, and purpose of humankind.

It can be easily observed that all the main features of this genesis cosmology appear throughout Bahá’í sacred literature. In Bahá’í scripture, as in the Bible, these features are often communicated through the use of symbolism, most notably:

- Anthropomorphic and spatial descriptions of God;
- A heavenly court with angels, maidens, and celestial souls;
- Symbols of archetypal evil and good, and rewards and punishment involving Satan, fiery torments, maidens, hell, and heaven;
- Eschatological use of the paradise motif.

The fact that the New Testament, the Qur’án, and Bahá’í scripture are characterized by an affirmative use of Judaic cosmological symbolism should not be attributed to a mere coincidence of cultural circumstances and the concomitant necessity of using common symbols in order to communicate. The affirmation of such cosmology reinforces an important theological view in the original Genesis account, that is, the belief that God has acted in history and will continue to do so in the future. This is, of course, the foundation of *theistic* religion.<sup>7</sup> The historical affirmation of continuity between the Genesis narrative and subsequent religions reinforces this belief.<sup>8</sup>

## Cosmology and Human Purpose

One of the most controversial aspects of Genesis cosmology is how it defines the station and purpose of humankind, what may be regarded as the *anthropology* of Genesis cosmology. These themes are embodied in the Genesis (P)<sup>9</sup> teaching that humans are created in the image of God and that they are to have dominion over all other creatures on earth. This belief is presented in the following context:

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<sup>7</sup> Stated simplistically, *theism* is the belief that God cares about humankind and acts in history to redeem humankind. This is the substance of belief in a personal God (see Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 139). Deism, for example, is a term used to signify the belief that God exists, but that having created the cosmos God is no longer actively involved in human destiny. Theism can be either polytheistic or monotheistic. The symbolic language of Bahá’í theism is strictly monotheistic.

<sup>8</sup> The genesis narrative could have been dismissed as spurious in preceding traditions, and the idea of redemptive history could have been communicated through some other historical data (imagined or real), but it is doubtful that such an approach could have been persuasive. The affirmation of past scripture communicates not only the continuance of divine revelation but also a form of evidence that God wishes for humankind to know that the divine bond exists.

<sup>9</sup> Most scholars today believe that the Book of Genesis is a composite work based on three main sources, which they designate J, E, and P: The Yahwistic (J) source uses the divine name “Yahweh” revealed to Moses; the Elohist source designates God by the common noun *elohim*; and the Priestly Code (P) contains laws and some narrative material. The theory has much to commend it, but it has received rather severe criticism from some scholars in recent years. This point is discussed briefly in Sours, “Immanence and Transcendence” 26.

And God said: “Let us<sup>10</sup> make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.” And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female created He them. And God blessed them; and God said unto them: “Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that creepeth upon the earth.” (Gen. 1:26–28)

The “image of God,” when viewed in this context, seems to imply that God desired or intended that humankind should be the image of divine sovereignty in the world. A longstanding traditional exegesis accepts that the “image of God”—or *imago dei*, as it is commonly referred to by theologians—represents not physicality but divine attributes (such as knowledge, sovereignty, love). This traditional view is also consistent with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation of the same verse.<sup>11</sup>

The following passage from Bahá’u’lláh reflects the same theme of the Genesis *imago dei* verse:

O SON OF MAN! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty. (*Hidden Words* 4)

The *imago dei* verse is unique to the creation story of Genesis 1:1–2:4a, which is attributed to the Priestly tradition (P). The other creation version (Gen. 2:4b–24) is more anthropomorphic in imagery and is thought to be more ancient and primitive—belonging to the Yahwistic tradition (J). It is interesting to note that Bahá’u’lláh presents the *imago dei* idea with the anthropomorphic image of God as an engraver carving God’s image into the human form, suggesting the message of P with the anthropomorphic symbolism of J.

In this same collection of verses (*Hidden Words*), Bahá’u’lláh uses two other key symbols found in the second Genesis narrative (J) concerning the creation of human beings—*clay* and *breath*:

Then the Lord God formed man<sup>12</sup> of the dust<sup>13</sup> of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath<sup>14</sup> of life, and man became a living soul. (Gen. 2:7)

This imagery is repeated in the Qur’án, ““He it is Who created you from clay” (6:2) and “Behold! thy Lord said to the angels: ‘I am about to create man, from sounding clay’” (15:28). In *The Hidden Words*, Bahá’u’lláh states “With the hands of power I made thee and with the fingers of strength I

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<sup>10</sup> Some have argued that the use of the plural—here translated as “us” and “our”—is evidence of the Trinity, the heavenly court and/or Sophia (Wisdom), or polytheism that was not entirely edited out, and so on. The traditional view is that “us” refers to the heavenly court, i.e., the angels and God. This view is suggested in the Qur’án, “Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: ‘I will create a viceregent on earth’” (Qur’án 2:32, 15:28).

<sup>11</sup> See ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 403–4.

<sup>12</sup> The Hebrew word here translated as “man” is *adam*.

<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew word used here is *‘aphar* and is translated also as “dust” in the King James Version of the Bible. The *New Jerusalem* edition translates *‘aphar* as “soil.” Cf. Bahá’u’lláh, *Hidden Words* 20.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrew *neshamah* (from *nasham*), meaning breath, inspiration, soul, spirit.

created thee” (6), and in the same Arabic text Bahá’u’lláh writes in another verse, “Out of the clay of love I molded thee” (*Hidden Words* 7). As in Genesis, the Qur’án states, “I [God] have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit” (15:29). Similarly, Bahá’u’lláh writes, “O son of the wondrous vision! I have breathed within thee a breath of My own Spirit, that thou mayest be My lover” (*Hidden Words* 8). Each time, Bahá’u’lláh uses the symbolism in an affirmative way but also goes on to elaborate on the imagery to give it a less concrete nature and more emphasis on a mystical message. The dust or clay of Genesis 2:7, for example, becomes the “clay of love,” and the imagery of the personal breath of God is used to create a sense of common identity between God and humans as the basis for a loving relationship.

Once humankind is made in the image of God, the text continues with the command to “be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. Be masters of . . . all the living creatures that move on earth” (Gen. 1:28). This message of procreation and dominion over creation is not retold in the quranic account of Adam, but it is reflected in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh. With reference to procreation Bahá’u’lláh writes, “He saith, great is His glory: ‘Marry, O people, that from you may appear he who will remember Me amongst My servants; this is one of My commandments unto you’” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 105), and again, in a separate prayer, “In Thine almighty wisdom Thou hast enjoined marriage upon the peoples, that the generations of men may succeed one another in this contingent world” (*Bahá’í Prayers* 105–6). There is nothing in either Genesis or Bahá’u’lláh’s positive idea of procreation that inherently means unmanaged population growth. Genesis encourages people to multiply, and Bahá’u’lláh encourages marriage and procreation, but neither seems to indicate anything other than the growth and perpetuation of the species. Neither discourages population growth or identifies it as a source of evil.

With regard to subduing the earth and having dominion over the creatures, Bahá’u’lláh writes:

Out of the wastes of nothingness, with the clay of My command I made thee to appear, and have ordained for thy training every atom in existence and the essence of all created things. (*Hidden Words* 32)

This theme—the inherent superiority of human beings—as well as the idea of advancing human civilization and mastering creation can be found throughout Bahá’í scripture:

The incomparable Creator hath created all men from one same substance, and hath exalted their reality above the rest of His creatures. Success or failure, gain or loss, must, therefore, depend upon man’s own exertions. The more he striveth, the greater will be his progress. (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 81–82)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

Praise and thanksgiving be unto Providence that out of all the realities in existence He has chosen the reality of man and has honored it with intellect and wisdom, the two most luminous lights in either world. . . .

This supreme emblem of God stands first in the order of creation and first in rank, taking precedence over all created things. (*Secret of Divine Civilization* 1)

The above hierarchical statements suggest an anthropocentric worldview.<sup>15</sup> It is a recurring theme in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s public talks and seems to be aimed at tapping the potential human development that can arise from this type of religious-hierarchical self-definition.

### **The Genesis Tradition in Bahá’í Scripture: Text and the Theme of Redemptive History**

Apart from isolated symbols in the Book of Genesis that are carried forward by succeeding religious traditions, including the Bahá’í Faith, it is perhaps useful to examine briefly how the text of Genesis as a document is treated in Bahá’í scripture, not with regard to authenticity but rather value. As will be shown, the value of the Genesis message is linked most profoundly in Bahá’í scripture to the theme of redemptive history.<sup>16</sup>

Most scholars agree that the Book of Genesis was formed into a composition much as we know it today by at least the time of Ezra (6th century BCE). Most also agree that certain parts of it date back to much older traditions. Beyond these basic points there is a great amount of debate. The modern source critical view is that the text is composed of three basic sources, designated by the letters *J*, *P*, and *E*, as mentioned above. It is a minor point, but if we accept the source critical view, then we must question whether the main antecedent of Bahá’í cosmology is, strictly speaking, the Book of Genesis.<sup>17</sup>

What can be said with certainty is that before the time of Christ the text was accepted by the Israelites as part of the Torah, their most important and sacred scriptures, and that they

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<sup>15</sup> Not all biblical or Bahá’í scripture suggests anthropocentrism. See, for example, Robin Attfield, “Christian Attitudes to Nature” 373.

<sup>16</sup> The term *redemptive history*, as used here, simply refers to the belief that history is governed by God so as to redeem humankind from evil and bondage. In biblical history, for example, God effects the redemption of the people from the bondage of Egypt. Redemption is not, however, limited to outward forms of bondage but relates to every individual’s salvation (for example, the bondage of self). Shoghi Effendi states that Bahá’u’lláh’s book *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* sets forth in outline “the Grand Redemptive Scheme of God” (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 139).

<sup>17</sup> The cosmological details in the Book of Genesis could themselves be influenced in part from other parts of the Bible believed to be actually contemporary or earlier in date (see, for example, the themes of hierarchy, redemptive history, duality, in the Book of Amos [763 BCE?]. See also Gen. 3 and Ezek. 28:11–19). The basic cosmological principles (for example, dualism, spatial symbolism) as they appear in Bahá’í scripture may therefore be traceable from those other earlier portions of the Bible; in which case, it is not possible to trace them “back” to the Book of Genesis alone. However, Bahá’í scripture draws heavily upon the narratives of Genesis and uses many symbols in a way that reflects the Genesis text. This suggests that there is no reason to try to divorce Bahá’í cosmological symbolism from the Bible and, in particular, the Book of Genesis. Traditionally, it was believed that Moses wrote the Book of Genesis after he had led the Israelites out of their bondage in Egypt. From this traditional point of view, Genesis provided the newly independent nation with a history, an identity, a vision of life, and a cosmology. Moses’ role in the composition of Genesis as a final work of literature seems doubtful to many modern scholars. Nevertheless, we can observe by comparison with other ancient cosmogonic myths possessed by the Babylonians, Greeks, and Egyptians, that the Israelite version was distinctively different. There are other ancient flood accounts, but these are not told in the dualistic theism that characterizes the Genesis account. From this observation, it is worth asking, what was the origin of this distinctive cosmological vision? Setting aside the text itself, it may be that the dualistic and theistic way of interpreting ancient narratives, as well as some of the narratives themselves, go back to some messianic figure in Israelite history, and that figure may have been Moses. This is, of course, speculation; there is no hard historical evidence to prove the identity of who wrote the texts or exactly when this may have occurred. Moreover, from a Bahá’í point of view, even though Shoghi Effendi regarded the Bible as authentic, he stated that the Bible could not be regarded as wholly authentic (see *Directives from the Guardian* 11). There is not, however, a correspondence between any one contemporary view about the Bible and Bahá’í teachings, as Bahá’í scripture tends to draw most from those portions of the Bible that are often the most disputed by modern academics (for example, Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, Revelation, and select prophetic texts).



attributed its ultimate origin to Moses. Its popularity and ancient existence is testified to by references in the New Testament and the Dead Sea Scroll discoveries in 1947. Whether or not there is any agreement concerning the authorship of Genesis, it is nonetheless clear that the text was accepted and valued as scripture in ancient times and that the succeeding religious founders, Christ, Muḥammad, and Bahá'u'lláh, referred to the stories contained in it. In fact, with regard to the Qur'án, Genesis—both the narratives and symbolism—proved to be one of the most influential and seminal books from among the Hebrew scriptures.

Important connections between the Book of Genesis and Bahá'í scripture extend beyond cosmological similarities and can be observed in direct affirmative references to the narratives, the development of typological prophecies based on the Genesis narratives, and the continuation of the liturgical theme of “calling on the name” of God.<sup>18</sup> There are also connections to the prophecies<sup>19</sup> and covenant<sup>20</sup> theology of Genesis. The actual text of Genesis is also quoted in Bahá'í scripture. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá makes direct theological connections between the suffering of Bahá'u'lláh and the message of Genesis 1:26.<sup>21</sup> He uses the same verse to expound on the purpose of human existence. Referring to the Genesis version of the story of Adam and Eve, he states that it

contains divine mysteries and universal meanings, and it is capable of marvelous explanations. Only those who are initiated into mysteries, and those who are near the Court of the All-Powerful, are aware of these secrets. (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 123)

In a public talk, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said:

As to the record in the Bible concerning Adam's entering paradise, His eating from the tree and His expulsion through the temptation of Satan: These are all symbols beneath which there are wonderful and divine meanings not to be calculated in years, dates and measurement of time. Likewise, the statement that God created the heaven and the earth in six days is symbolic. (‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 219–20)

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<sup>18</sup> In Bahá'í scriptures there are references to the creation account and to all the main narrative sequences: the story of Adam and Eve, Noah and the Flood, Babel, Abraham, Sarah, Lot, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and key symbols, such as angels, Satan, the tree of life, paradise, and the ark. For example, for references to “angels,” in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, see *Synopsis of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 16 and *Gleanings* 16, 45, 125, 228, 277, 295, 309, 334; for references to “Satan,” and the “Evil One,” see *Epistle* 54, 66; *Gleanings* 41, 94, 118, 126, 168, 275; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 112, 123, 257; and *Tablets* 87, 156, 177; for references to the sacred tree, see *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 6, 20, 29, 38, 198; for references to the ark, see *Synopsis of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 19; *Epistle* 36, 79, 83, 93, 135, 139; *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 62, 187 and *Tablets* 5, 71, 97, 116, 120, 134, 205, 208.

<sup>19</sup> Concerning Joseph, see Sours, “Immanence and Transcendence” 18; concerning Genesis 17:20 and 21:21 and their connection to the Twelve Imáms of Shíah Islam, see Shoghi Effendi, *Letters to Australia and New Zealand* 41.

<sup>20</sup> By this is meant the promises God made concerning guidance and deliverance, and concerning the law—all of which is central to religious theism of the Judaic-Christian-Islamic-Bahá'í tradition. See, for example, Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 106. Bahá'u'lláh cites the record of God's successive promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob implied in Moses' theophanic experience on Sinai to remind people today that as God made and fulfilled his promise of deliverance in the past God will do so again in this age (see *Tablets* 265).

<sup>21</sup> See ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 28.

These statements indicate the spiritual value placed on the Genesis text in Bahá'í sources. The prophetic and covenant connections emphasize the important way Genesis is used to reinforce the message of redemptive history in Bahá'í teaching—the central teaching expressing the active relationship between humankind and God. The primal garden was a condition characterized by close communion between God and creation. In the narrative, this ideal condition ends when human beings disobey the command of God. The original order is destroyed, and humankind is expelled from the garden. In Christian theology this event is known as the “fall” and marks the beginning of suffering in the world. God then establishes covenants and intervenes periodically to redeem humankind from this fallen state. As biblical eschatology unfolds throughout the Bible (and later in the Qur'án), it becomes clear that history follows a progression, the aim of which is the ultimate redemption of humankind and the reestablishment of the primal paradise.

The original paradise, the forbidden fruit, and the expulsion from the garden are the key symbols that communicate the nature of humankind's condition and relationship with God. Following the expulsion there are certain righteous individuals—Noah, Abraham, and Joseph—whom God singles out to speak on God's behalf. These persons act as witnesses to God's existence and love for humankind as well as warners to those who are leading themselves and others toward self-destruction. This historical pattern stresses two important theological themes underlying Israelite religion: the existence of a “personal” God and God's continuing intervention in history (i.e., theism). The goal of history is, therefore, redemption, which is signified by the restoration of close communion and fellowship between God and humankind.<sup>22</sup> This condition—symbolized by life in the primal garden—requires that human beings live in accordance with the Will of God.

Although this type of redemptive history: has some parallels in Hindu<sup>23</sup> and Buddhist scriptures,<sup>24</sup> it is a dominant theme throughout much of the Bible. In the New Testament, Christ connects his own ministry with this on-going historical process. Each of the Gospel narratives make important connections with past redemptive history. Also, the Book of Acts provides a type

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<sup>22</sup> It was from the interpretation of personal and national events that evidence for divine activity was established. The authenticity of the record of such evidence therefore became extremely important. Today, the authenticity of such records has been undermined to such an extent that it poses a great challenge to how traditional theism is understood and taught. Once the messianic and eschatological vision of the Hebrew scriptures was, for example, divorced from belief in revealed text, the entire perception of Christ's self-identity changed in the minds of modern thinkers. Given Bahá'í textual use of biblical eschatology, it is difficult to see how Bahá'u'lláh's claims will escape the same critical perceptions.

<sup>23</sup> In the *Bhagavad-gita* Krishna proclaims to Arjuna: “I told this eternal secret to Vivasvat. Vivasvat taught Manu, and Manu taught Ikshvaku. Thus, Arjuna, eminent sages received knowledge of yoga in a continuous tradition. But through time the practice of yoga was lost in the world” (4:1–2). Arjuna, surprised by this claim, questions Krishna, “You were born much after Vivasvat: he lived very long ago. Why do you say that you taught this yoga in the beginning?” (4:4. trans. by Eknath Easwaran). See also verses 4:6–8. Krishna's claim and Arjuna's question call to mind Jesus' claim that “before Abraham, I am” (John 8:58).

<sup>24</sup> In the *Mahapadana Sultana* (The Sublime Story), for example, Buddha is recorded to have said, “It is now ninety-one aeons ago, brethren, since Vipassi, the Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, arose in the world. It is now thirty-one aeons ago, brethren, since Sikhi, the Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, arose in the world. It was in that same thirty-first aeons, brethren, that Vessabhu, the Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, arose in the world. It was in this present auspicious aeon, brethren, that Kakusandha, the Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, rose in the world. It was in this present auspicious aeon, brethren, that Konagamana, the Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, arose in the world. It was in this present auspicious aeon, brethren, that Kassapa, the Exalted One, Arahant, Buddha Supreme, arose in the world. It is in this present auspicious aeon, brethren, that I, an Arahant, Buddha Supreme, have arisen in the world” (T. W. and C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Dialogues of the Buddha* 5). This passage provides a clear statement of periodic divine activity throughout history by different holy personages. Particularly significant is the message of divine unity: they are different by name, yet all in their internality are the one “Buddha Supreme.”

of Genesis-like reiteration of redemptive history by the inclusion of a sermon attributed to St. Stephen (the whole of chapter 7). Similarly, reiterations can be found in the Qur'án and in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh's most important doctrinal book, the first section of which is structured around a Genesis-like historical overview of past prophetic ministries.<sup>25</sup> Genesis is unique among biblical books in that it narrates several sequential prophetic ministries in detail, stories which are not retold in scripture<sup>26</sup> with as much similar detail until the emergence of the Qur'án<sup>27</sup> and the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*.

### Differences between Genesis and Bahá'í Cosmology

Perhaps the principal difference between Genesis and Bahá'í cosmology is the absence of some, but not all, geographic or cosmographical features. Both Bahá'í scripture and Genesis use spatial symbolism creating a hierarchical cosmography, but in Genesis the heavens above are composed of water, and the stars, sun, and moon seem to be fixed to the overarching firmament above. The classical understanding is reflected in Rabbi Simeon b. Yohai's description of the cosmos as a pot with a cover on it.<sup>28</sup> Bahá'í cosmology suggests this only insofar as it can be inferred from the spatial symbolism of God "above." Moreover, the strong affirmation of empirical science is a principle of the Bahá'í Faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá acknowledged the findings of contemporary science and used them to point out the symbolic nature of scripture. He, for example, stressed the unlimited nature of space outside the earth's biosphere in order to point out that the resurrection of Christ was a spiritual fact rather than a material fact. For this reason, there is a dichotomy in Bahá'í cosmology: since ancient symbolism is used to convey spiritual truth, there is a cosmology of *spiritual* reality; but, since modern scientific discoveries are also acknowledged, there is a cosmology of *material* reality.

In some ways, the two intersect, particularly in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's affirmation that religion must conform to reason and scientific inquiry. However, it is also true that the two cosmologies intersect only insofar as each exegete's understanding of symbolism and science permit. For example, it is possible to conclude that (1) both cosmological orders—the spiritual cosmological order of Bahá'í scripture (such as hierarchies of angels) and that of material reality as generally understood by contemporary science—are truly existent and truly created by God; (2) both provide evidence that human beings possess superior mental capacities over other creatures, which in this respect give human beings a superior position hierarchically to other creatures. From a less literal point of view, others might argue that it is not possible to speak of Bahá'í cosmology, i.e., hierarchies of spiritual beings, celestial maidens, planes of existence, and so forth, as "truly existent" because it is entirely symbolic, the symbolic form governed solely by ethical intentions that concern how to live, not how the cosmic order is actually constructed. That is to say, they are not symbols which point to realities that cannot be expressed otherwise; rather, they are symbols intended to evoke spiritual, ethical responses. Whatever the case may be, there is sufficient

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<sup>25</sup> Part one of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* begins with an opening thesis-type statement, which is then reiterated in the following paragraph. What then follows is an extensive discourse in support of this opening thesis, beginning with the words, "Consider the past"—words that initiate Bahá'u'lláh's discourse on past redemptive history, in the course of which he also expounds on such subjects as hermeneutics and themes such as divine tests, prophecy, and God's providence.

<sup>26</sup> This is, of course, with the exception of certain apocryphal texts and traditional stories.

<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Súrih 11.

<sup>28</sup> See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 5:982.

exegetical latitude within the provisions of the Bahá'í Faith to allow for a wide range of opinions.<sup>29</sup> However individuals choose to interpret Bahá'í scripture, the observations made in this article are not intended to obscure the very important holistic, non-dualistic, and non-hierarchical elements in Bahá'í teachings.<sup>30</sup> The point here is *not*, for example, that the Bahá'í Faith teaches dualism but rather that it is a fact that Bahá'í symbolism is dualistic. The question of what the Bahá'í Faith actually teaches on an ontological level is an altogether separate issue outside the immediate intention of this work.

Having surveyed Bahá'í symbolism, its sources and characteristics, we now come to the next stage in this exploration of Bahá'í symbolism, the nature of counterarguments.

### **The Ecological and Feminist Critique of Western Religious Cosmology**

The above points concerning the traditions arising from the Book of Genesis and its symbolism in Bahá'í scripture show that the Bahá'í Faith *does not* create a wholly new cosmological symbolism alien to its local environment (the Middle East). This documentation of Bahá'í symbolism also draws attention to the factual existence and prevalence of dualistic, hierarchical, anthropocentric, and gender-specific symbolism in Bahá'í scripture. The realization of the existence of such symbolism may be cause for reflection when considering the current arguments against the same symbolism as it appears in the Bible, especially among environmentalists and feminists. As will be shown, their critiques of Western religious symbolism contribute important insights that are useful to the interpretation of symbolism.

At the present time, various forms of monistic (even pantheistic) beliefs are becoming more popular. There is, for example, a genuine and positive desire among some theologians to build philosophical links between the traditional dualistic Western religious approach of Christianity and the more monistic ideas in various Buddhist and Hindu schools of thought.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of this article is not to oppose or undermine this type of discourse. It is, however, important to cut through symbolism in order to try to understand what purpose and message certain types of symbols were intended to convey. If it is true that Bahá'í symbolism is predominantly dualistic and anthropocentric, then it is reasonable to ask why and to try to understand the purpose of such symbolism rather than neglecting, dismissing, or obscuring it. It is possible to presuppose that holistic and non-dualistic thinking is best and that is, therefore, how Bahá'í teachings should be understood and presented, but at some point, it seems likely that someone is going to read Bahá'í scripture and notice all the dualistic, hierarchical, anthropocentric, and gender-specific symbolism. Moreover, if symbolism has functional importance in human self-definition, it may be important from a number of points of view to sustain it.

The cosmology of Genesis contains a number of significant points that relate to the station of human beings in relation to other creatures and the environment. It can be said that this

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<sup>29</sup> Bahá'í self-definition is established in part by the provisions of Bahá'u'lláh's covenant that necessitate the unity of the community of believers. Individuals are allowed to interpret the sacred writings for themselves, but not as individuals or as distinct groups to insist that such interpretations are binding on the rest or part of the community. See Universal House of Justice, *Wellspring of Guidance* 88–89.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, "Conservation of the Earth's Resources," prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, published in *The Compilation of Compilations*, vol. I., and Robert E. White, "Spiritual Foundations for an Ecologically Sustainable Society."

<sup>31</sup> In the Bahá'í community, the most serious attempt to explore the monist-dualist question in relation to Bahá'í teachings is Moojan Momen's "Relativism: A Basis for Bahá'í Metaphysics."

cosmology—or at least how it has been understood—has influenced how people define themselves, how they view the world around them, and ultimately how they act toward the environment.

In recent decades, as the human population has grown dramatically and achieved a global dominance that has caused an acceleration in the otherwise normal extinction of animal species, many intellectuals have begun to speculate about how this situation emerged. Why is there so much degradation of the environment and what attitudes and beliefs must be changed in order to stop it? Some theologians have also asked why prevailing religious beliefs have failed to avert the present ecological crisis.

A seminal essay on this subject was written by Lynn White in 1967. White argued that the Western religious tradition had given rise to ecologically disastrous perceptions about the environment. Later writers criticized his paper as lacking causal connections, being imprecise and speculative,<sup>32</sup> but he made connections that would later become foundational for some ecologists and feminists. He argued, for example, that “what we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship” (“The Historical Roots of Our Environmental Crisis” 1206). The link between beliefs and behavior is not original, but he had brought this awareness to bear on human perceptions about cosmology and its ramifications for the environment. He also drew attention to the historic shift in human consciousness from animism to dualism (specifically the dualistic Judaic-Christian cosmology):

By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. . . . The spirits in natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man’s effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled. (“Historical Roots” 1205)

This point about animism has led some to embrace the belief that ecological wellbeing depends on restoring some form of monism, such as the ancient goddess myth<sup>33</sup> or, in recent years, constructing a new myth around the idea that the earth is a living entity.<sup>34</sup> After painting a depressing and unfriendly portrait of Christianity, White concludes, “We shall continue to have a worsening ecological crisis until we reject the Christian axiom that nature has no reason for existence save to serve man” (“Historical Roots” 1207).

Various theologians and scholars entered into the subsequent controversy, and several main arguments have emerged against White’s views. From the theological front, James Barr, along with many other biblical scholars, provided the predictable defense of biblical cosmology (Barr, “Man and Nature”); a leading feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether shifts the blame to more ancient dualistic philosophical influences on Christianity (Ruether, “Motherearth and the Megamachine,” in Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*): the historian of philosophy C. Glacken argued that it is the distinctive features of Western scientific philosophy and not the commands of God in Genesis that are at the root of contemporary attitudes toward nature, suggesting that these views have had a greater impact on how Genesis was understood than vice

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, David Pepper, *The Roots of Modern Environmentalism* 44–46. For a detailed analysis, see Robin Attfield, “Christian Attitudes to Nature.”

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Caitlin Matthews, *Sophia: Goddess of Wisdom*.

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Lawrence E. Joseph, *Gaia: The Growth of an Idea*.

versa<sup>35</sup> while Lewis Moncrief, an environmentalist and anthropologist, argued that the environmental crisis is not Western in origin but universally latent because “no culture has been able to completely screen out the egocentric tendencies of human beings” (“Cultural Basis for Our Environmental Crisis” 3957).

Whatever the weaknesses of White’s arguments, today many environmentalists have come to accept this critique of Western religious cosmology. The political scientist and specialist in environmental policy, John McCormick, for example, acknowledges that Moncrief’s case “may be true enough,” but states that

in terms of breadth and volume, the most severe environmental problems have come only in the last 150 years, in proportion to the spread of the industrial revolution and of European settlement and colonization to other continents. (*The Global Environmental Movement* 197)<sup>36</sup>

McCormick does not devote any significant attention to the debate, and he does not provide a detailed analysis of the issues in support of his conclusion, but it shows how compelling White’s reasoning can be. If we take the last 150 years as a yardstick for measuring human effects on the environment, it seems unlikely that people’s attitudes about procreation or the environment have changed simply because of Christianity or even European culture; rather, the growth of population the world over has simply meant that human activities that had a negligible effect are now having an extraordinary effect. A small village in the past, for example, might cause a limited degree of deforestation for heating and cooking purposes, but the same practice in a large urban population in, for example, India today can have a very significant impact on surrounding flora.

White’s portrait of exploitation resulting from excessive human dominance also found a sympathetic audience among feminist theologians, to whom human dominance means, foremost, male dominance. Feminist theology can be defined as an attempt to revalue and integrate the experience of women into the world of religious thought. When the feminist theological approach was joined with ecological concerns and the critique of Western religious cosmology, it eventually came to be known as “eco-feminism.”<sup>37</sup> In the last few years an increasing number of books exploring this subject have emerged.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> “In the period roughly from the end of the fifteenth until the end of the seventeenth century one sees ideas of man as controller of nature beginning to crystallize, along more modern lines. It is in the thought of this period (not the commands of God in Genesis to have dominion over nature, as the Japanese authority on Zen Buddhism, Daisetz Susuki, thinks) that there begins a unique formulation of Western thought, marking itself off from the other great traditions, such as the Indian and the Chinese, which also are concerned with the relationship of man to nature. This awareness of man’s power increases greatly in the eighteenth century, as will be apparent in the works of Buffon and others. It increases even more dramatically in the nineteenth century with the host of new ideas and interpretations, while in the twentieth, Western man has attained a breathtaking anthropocentrism, based on his power over nature, unmatched by anything in the past” (Glacken, *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* 494).

<sup>36</sup> The reasons may be different, but Shoghi Effendi’s apocalyptic warning concerning the “evil” of “materialism,” traces a similar geography: “It is this same cancerous materialism, born originally in Europe, carried to excess in the North American continent, contaminating the Asiatic peoples and nations, spreading its ominous tentacles to the borders of Africa, and now invading its very heart, which Bahá’u’lláh in unequivocal and emphatic language denounced in His Writings, comparing it to a devouring flame and regarding it as the chief factor in precipitating the dire ordeals and world-shaking crises that must necessarily involve the burning of cities and the spread of terror and consternation in the hearts of men” (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* 125).

<sup>37</sup> Concerning the term and its problems, see Anne Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis* ix.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Plant, ed., *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism*; Diamond and Orenstein, eds., *Reweaving the World: The Emergence of Ecofeminism*; Daly, *Ecofeminism: Sacred Matter—Sacred Mother*;

Feminist theology, like the more specialized field of ecofeminism, can be divided into two primary groups. One group argues for reform, reevaluation, and reinterpretation of Western religious cosmology within the Jewish and Christian community. The other group advocates with varying intensities (1) the abandonment of Judaic-Christian cosmology including its most central features (i.e., the dualistic god myth) and (2) the revitalization of the ancient goddess myth, a movement sometimes identified as “Neopaganism.” These two tendencies represent the dominant trends, but there have also been some who advocate a type of middle path—a marriage of God with the goddess.<sup>39</sup>

One of the leading feminists to initiate the critique of Western cosmology was Rosemary Ruether, a theologian who is said to hold to the belief that “the Christian tradition has a liberating core that can be used to transform oppressive dualism” (qtd. in Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising* 22). Her contribution is summarized concisely by Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow:

sexism is rooted in the dualistic world view that grew out of the dramatic religious changes that swept classical civilization in the first millennium B.C.E. The breakdown of tribal culture in that period led to the disruption of the holistic perspective that characterized early human societies. Woman and man, nature and culture, body and spirit, Goddess and God, once bound together in a total vision of world renewal, became split off from each other and ordered hierarchically. When male culture-creating groups appropriated the positive side of each of these dualisms for themselves, the age-old male-female polarity was given a newly oppressive significance. Women were identified with nature, body, the material realm, all of which were considered distinctly inferior to transcendent male spirit. A new language of female subordination was forged, a language that eventually was applied to other oppressed groups—such as the carnal Jew and the sexual Negro—and that was also used to justify exploitation of despised nature.

Ruether’s argument at once specified and broadened Saiving’s claim that theology is a product of male experience, for it describes the nature of sexism and shows that it has deep roots in Christian tradition. This analysis has profound implications for feminist thought. It suggests that the liberation of women is finally contingent on overcoming those dualisms that have for centuries molded Western consciousness. It links the women’s movement with the movement for ecological sanity. It suggests that women—because their oppression is a model for the oppression of others—have a special role to play in the struggle for planetary liberation. (*Womanspirit Rising* 21–22)

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Primavesi, *From Apocalypse to Genesis: Ecology, Feminism and Christianity*; and Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*.

<sup>39</sup> “Back in the Bronze Age a union of the mythic images of the feminine and the masculine principles was symbolized in the ‘sacred marriage’ of the goddess and the god, a ritual ceremony that was believed to assist the regeneration or nature. With the greater self-consciousness of 4,000 years later, may it not be possible to re-create in the human imagination the same kind of insights that once were enacted in unconscious participation with the same purpose: the renewal of creative life? What would the modern dress of this ancient dream be? With the restoration of the feminine to a complementary relation with the masculine, might there then be the possibility of a new mythology of the universe as one harmonious living whole? Nature and Spirit, after the many millennia of their separation, newly embraced as one and the same” (Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess* xv, see also chap. 16, esp. 676). Perhaps the sacred marriage symbolism of Bahá’u’lláh and the Maid of Heaven (i.e., Spirit or God) has something to offer to this concern.

This summary is particularly good in that it captures in one brief articulate stroke a wide range of feminist ideas: the romantic pre-Classical age of the goddess and the concomitant anti-dualist, anti-hierarchy tendency leading up to the messianic role of women in solving the ecological crisis. Some may find the male-female adversarial nature and particulars of the arguments unconvincing, but there are at least three important points of positive contact between these observations and Bahá'í teachings: (1) Whereas it may not be possible to agree with causal connections in the anti-dualist, anti-hierarchy thesis, it follows that the dualism of Western religious cosmology should not be used to create a gender hierarchy in human society that makes women subordinates; (2) the world's present problems are partly due to the dominance of men and the overvaluation of male qualities; and (3) social problems will not be solved until women share an equal position on all levels of social activity. These common points also constitute, perhaps, the most important aspects of Ruether's arguments. The differences are not so much about conclusions as the historical-ideological causes.

Another particularly interesting aspect of Ruether's argument is the suggestion that there was once a time—the pre-Classical age—when sexism did not exist, a time then followed by the subordination of women lasting until the current age. Some believe that the evidence for this theory concerning a distinct matriarchal or non-sexist pre-Classical age is inconclusive,<sup>40</sup> but if it proved to be true, it finds a parallel where some more radical feminists might least expect it—in the Genesis narrative; that is, in the symbolic imagery of the primal Garden there was equality. It was only after the expulsion that women were made subordinate to men.<sup>41</sup>

Other feminists who have built on this theoretical foundation have felt that Western religion is too flawed by oppressive male dualistic symbolism—"God language"—and must be rejected to advance the cause or liberation. One such theologian is Mary Daly, whose views are summarized as follows:

Even if theologians insist that God is not male, the symbols convey their own meaning. "The medium is the message" as she puts it in *Beyond God the Father*. It is not only the gender of God that Daly finds oppressive, however, but also His character and attributes. Borrowing Ruether's analysis of dualistic consciousness, Daly argues that the notion of "Supreme Being" who is other than and infinitely superior to subservient humanity is the quintessential product of a patriarchal mentality that perceives everything in terms of higher-lower, good-evil, male-female. If women are to overcome their oppression, they must reject not only the male God but also all hierarchy and dualism, or which God language is simply an expression.

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<sup>40</sup> "Modern feminists find the theory of female dominance in religion as well as in other areas of prehistoric culture attractive, as though what has happened in the past could be repeated in the future. This popular view is understandable, since, if women were not subordinate in the past, we have no ipso facto proof that they are so by nature. . . . However, to use the mother goddess theory to draw any conclusions regarding the high status of human females of the time would be foolhardy. Later religions, in particular Christianity, have demonstrated that the mother may be worshipped in societies where male dominance and even misogyny are rampant" (Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves* 15). According to Riane Eisler, the Hebrew men who authored the Genesis narrative transformed and reworked ancient myths so as to discredit the goddess and make women subservient to a "vengeful God and his earthly representatives, man" (*The Chalice and the Blade* 89). In this way the benevolent goddess myth—as she understands it—was replaced by the Bible which "served to establish and maintain a reality of male dominance, hierarchism, and war" (*The Chalice and the Blade* 89). I am grateful to Roxanne Lalonde who suggested including a reference to Eisler's influential work.

<sup>41</sup> This point is acknowledged by several important feminist theologians. See for example, Phyllis Trible, "Eve and Adam: Genesis 2–3 Reread" in Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising*.



This argument challenges Christianity profoundly, for it says that not simply ideas and doctrines (as Saiving argues) but also its core symbolism have been molded (or warped) by male perspective. If Daly is right, then the alternatives are two: Fundamentally transform this symbolism or abandon it altogether. (Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising* 23–24)

This summary of Mary Daly's views is perhaps somewhat misleading, given the more complex particulars of her arguments,<sup>42</sup> but it is used here rather than a composite of passages from her own writings because it is a *more* forceful and succinct expression of how the “God language” argument is understood among many feminists.

Briefly, dualism leads to hierarchy, which leads to oppression. When men characterize the top of the hierarchy as distinctively male through the use of male symbolism, they are able to justify their dominance over women and nature. Judaic, Christian, and Muslim—and now presumably Bahá'í—symbolism is the product of this male tendency. This is the essence of the argument.

Not all feminists find this line of argumentation compelling,<sup>43</sup> and there are a number of important issues that should surely be considered, such as the liberating influence of Christianity in history, the distinction between sexist interpretations and the actual content of scripture, the possible merits of male symbolism (such as the heavenly Father who is loving and just), and the significant amount of positive feminine symbolism actually present in scripture (most notably the Wisdom texts).

It seems that the anthropological message of biblical and Bahá'í cosmology is intended to encourage human development, both spiritual and material. Current desires to embrace, for example, the monist cosmologies and the goddess myth are often attempts to find solutions to oppression arising from abuses in hierarchical social structures and to moderate materialistic excesses that are causing the degradation of the environment. Nevertheless, the inclusive, environmentally positive, and non-sexist teachings in the Bahá'í Faith seem to indicate that there is no *necessary* causal connection between dualistic gender-specific symbolism and oppression, be it environmental or social. This, of course, is not to say that such symbolism has not been exploited in the past for oppressive reasons or that this type of exploitation will not continue if allowed.

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<sup>42</sup> Mary Daly actually writes: “The widespread conception of the ‘Supreme Being’ as an entity distinct from this world but controlling it according to plan and keeping human beings in a state of infantile subjection has been a not too subtle mask or the divine patriarch” (quoted in *Womanspirit Rising* 56–57). This is either a “straw-figure” argument (i.e., a way of constructing biblical theology in the worst light before setting it on fire) or a legitimate attack on distorted exegesis. Whichever, Daly's arguments must be viewed in context with the particular issues she is reacting against, such as the hypostasis of God as male to legitimize oppression of women and a sexist interpretation of the uniqueness of Jesus' incarnation.

<sup>43</sup> Eleanor L. McLaughlin, for example, shifts the focus of the argument from patriarchal power to the quest for and value of spirituality, “The point to be made here, is that in medieval Christianity the highest religious and moral values of the society were exemplified not typically by the all-male clerical bureaucracy, but by the religious and those whom the people called the *saints*, categories in which women as well as men took an equal and active place” (from “The Christian Past: Does it Hold a Future for Women?” in Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising* 103). McLaughlin also points out examples of how the female experience of women mystics often led to new symbolic expressions in their theological-mystical writings. Phyllis Trible's reinterpretations of Genesis—perhaps the most enlightened Christian exegesis on the text—also show that the past scriptures do not inevitably mean the oppression of women. Her analysis points to the distinction between obsolescent male-centric interpretations/doctrines and the potential renaissance in the theological understanding of past scriptures that can arise from the feminist critique.

## Reinterpreting Cosmological Symbolism for the New Age

One of the most beneficial aspects of the ecological and feminist critiques of biblical cosmology has been a reassessment and reinterpretation of biblical teachings concerning such issues as nature, hierarchy, dualism, dominion, and stewardship. A number of persuasive and positive books have emerged which try to show that the Bible teaches both dominion and responsible stewardship, including animal rights.<sup>44</sup>

Another contribution of feminist theologians is their work in the field of hermeneutics, their most basic contribution being that “the vision of the theologian is affected by the particularities of his or her experience as male or female” (Christ and Plaskow, *Womanspirit Rising* 20). Perhaps the main merit of ecofeminism is to channel this awareness toward addressing the ecological crisis and to offer a positive vision of how feminine values are essential to ecological restoration and balance. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stressed that women will be regarded as equal in all sciences and arts, but also “superior” with regard to “tenderness of heart and the abundance of mercy and sympathy” (*Paris Talks* 184). This suggests that women’s contributions to exegesis offer a brighter future for how Bahá’í scriptures will influence the development of civilization than in past religious history.

It is unlikely, however, that many people will embrace a line of argumentation which insists too strongly that Judaic scriptures; the New Testament, the Qur’án, and now even Bahá’í scripture are *inherently* flawed by an environmentally unfriendly cosmology. If humankind has to work together to solve the ecological crisis, any ideology that attempts to eradicate or denigrate the world’s existing scriptural heritage will only lead to disunity and worsen the world’s problem. This particular ecofeminist argument, if carried to an extreme, will have very little prospect of making: a positive contribution to the trend toward greater interreligious harmony.

Nevertheless, in each ecofeminist tendency, a very legitimate concern and contribution can be observed, and there are many positive points of contact between their concerns and Bahá’í teachings. Many of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanations at the turn of the century are widely accepted today among feminist theologians who have reacted against male-centric exegesis. He rejected the sexist and racist interpretation of the *imago dei* teaching in Genesis and stressed its spiritual nature. He also pointed out the example of numerous women, such women as Mary Magdalene, as evidence for the equality of women and men. Those feminists who have reacted against male scriptural symbolism and looked toward the symbolism of the ancient goddess myth to reaffirm the value of the feminine will also find that feminine symbolism has a central place in Bahá’í scripture.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> A very balanced, ecumenical treatment of the subject is Regen stein’s *Replenish the Earth*. The World Wide Fund for Nature has sponsored a five-volume series of books on religion and ecology, each volume representing a different religion (the series covers Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism). Some Green politicians are also committed Christians. Tim Cooper, for example, wrote *Green Christianity: Caring for the Whole Creation*. See also, Ian Bradley, *God Is Green: Christianity and the Environment*.

<sup>45</sup> See Sours, “Immanence and Transcendence.” In Christian theology, the three persons of the Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—are all signified by male symbolism, although some argue that the Holy Spirit is neutral. In Bahá’í symbolism, God is sometimes described by way of male symbolism (and the English translations all use male language: “He” for God and “man” for humankind), but the Spirit of God is expressed by way of female symbolism, which is conceptually linked to all theophanies. In addition to feminine symbolism for the spirit, Bahá’í scripture affirms the ancient feminine symbolism of “Wisdom” (see Sours, “The Maid of Heaven”) and the traditional correlation of the human soul (both for men and women) with the feminine (see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions* 123). These examples of feminine symbolism are so central and important to Bahá’í symbolism that it is not possible to argue convincingly that Bahá’í symbolism is male-dominated.

In his public talks, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms that God created women and men equal. He also returns repeatedly to the *imago dei* theme as found in Genesis. Arguing against the male-centric interpretation of Genesis, he stated:

*Man* is a generic term applying to all humanity. The biblical statement “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” does not mean that woman was not created. The image and likeness of God apply to her as well. In Persian and Arabic there are two distinct words translated into English as man: one meaning man and woman collectively, the other distinguishing man as male from woman the female. The first word and its pronoun are generic, collective; the other is restricted to the male. This is the same in Hebrew.

To accept and observe a distinction which God has not intended in creation is ignorance and superstition. . . . Until the reality of equality between man and woman is fully established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 76; see also, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 79)

In other talks, he cites the *imago dei* theme to stress human superiority over other creatures. Nevertheless, this superiority is conditioned on responsible custodianship, as can be seen in the following passages:

It is recorded in the Holy Bible that God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” It is self-evident that the image and likeness mentioned do not apply to the form and semblance of a human being because the reality of Divinity is not limited to any form or figure. Nay, rather, the attributes and characteristics of God are intended. Even as God is pronounced to be just, man must likewise be just. As God is loving and kind to all men, man must likewise manifest loving-kindness to all humanity. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation of Universal Peace* 403–4; cf. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 140)

God has created all in His image and likeness. Shall we manifest hatred for His creatures and servants? This would be contrary to the will of God and according to the will of Satan, by which we mean the natural inclinations of the lower nature. This lower nature in man is symbolized as Satan—the evil ego within us, not an evil personality outside. (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 287)

In both examples above, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá links human superiority to the potential to reflect the attributes of divinity, among which is justice and loving-kindness. A ruthless and irresponsible tyranny over other creatures would in effect negate humankind’s claim to a superior position.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Anthropocentrism—the belief that humans are the central or the superior creatures in creation—is, according to some animal rights activists, a prejudice like racism, which they call “speciesism” (see Jasper and Nelkin, *The Animal Rights Crusade* 91). Speciesism is defined by animal rights activist Peter Singer as “a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species” (*Animal Liberation* 6). Singer writes: “It is on this basis that the case against racism and the case against sexism must both ultimately rest; and it is in accordance with this principle that the attitude that we may call ‘speciesism,’ by analogy with racism, must also be condemned” (*Animal Liberation* 6). The equation between speciesism, racism, and sexism was first introduced by Richard D. Ryder (see *Victims of Science*). This attempt to eradicate all delineations between species is problematic. “Without any species delineations, the ban on [animal] cruelty, taken to its logical extreme,

As can be seen above, the Bahá'í Faith perpetuates the basic elements of biblical cosmology but not the traditional male exegesis of biblical texts. Bahá'í scriptures make it clear that the dominion of humankind over nature includes men and women and that it must be a just dominion and responsible custodianship. However, these points alone do not fully summarize the possible scope of Bahá'í scriptures applicable to this subject.

Another aspect that deserves attention is the role of the eschatological vision of Bahá'í scripture. This brings us to the third and final part of this examination of Bahá'í cosmological symbolism, a brief outline of how the eschatological character of Bahá'í cosmological symbolism provides some important answers to many feminist and environmentalist concerns.

## Genesis and Bahá'í Eschatology

The Genesis narratives provide an important framework for subsequent eschatological symbolism in Christian, Islamic, and Bahá'í scripture and traditions. This eschatological aspect has significance for ecofeminist concerns.

As mentioned above, Genesis begins with the establishment of an ideal paradise in which human beings enjoy close communion with God, a communion suggested by the symbolic depiction of God's presence in the garden. Later in scripture, prophecies occur which center on the promise that this ideal paradise and communion will be restored. This promise is perhaps most graphic in the final chapters of the New Testament Book of Revelation where its fulfillment is closely tied to the promise of Christ's return.<sup>47</sup>

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would condemn insecticides and antibiotics as instruments of torture and genocide to bugs and microbes. The counterargument might be made that the anticruelty doctrine still holds, though, since these pests thereby are being prevented from the cruelty they would impose on us" (Joseph, *Gaia: The Growth of an Idea* 196; see also Cooper, *Green Christianity* 226–30). The question must be considered, does an anthropocentric belief system inherently lead to cruelty to animals, such as practiced in some sectors of the fanning and medical research industry? 'Abdu'l-Bahá does indicate a certain anthropocentrism. For example, he writes, "Man [i.e., humans], therefore, on the plane of the contingent world is the most perfect being" (*Selections* 62), and in a letter he warns against kindness to "pernicious creatures [for example, poisonous snakes, wolves], the reason being that kindness to these is an injustice to human beings" (*Selections* 159). It should, however, be taken into consideration that this warning was in the context of simple advice, such as teach children to be kind to animals but not to pet poisonous snakes. It was not directed at larger ecological problems such as sustaining creatures in ecosystems and protecting endangered species. Whether or not such statements are truly anthropocentric, it is clear that the hierarchical station of human beings in Bahá'í thought is not adequate basis for the justification of cruelty to animals or human chauvinism toward the environment. If we do not plan to grant scorpions the right to sleep in bed with us, or tigers the right to roam our children's school playgrounds, this presupposes that human beings will manage the liberties of animals rather than leave such matters to them, and this management implies a type of human stewardship.

<sup>47</sup> This correlation is also present in Islamic cosmology and eschatology. The garden is the quranic symbol for paradise, *al-jannah* referring to both the Garden of Adam and Eve and to the paradise to come (see Qur'án 2:23; 15:47–48; 47:15; 56:10–14, 22–39; 76:5–22). "[T]he idea of Paradise as a reward for the Muslim faithful" is "a basic concept developed by Muhammad from the beginning of his apostolic mission in Mecca. This was more than an abstract vision of future bliss because the Prophet made many specific statements as to the garden's topography, its nature and its inhabitants. Since then, these descriptions have played an important part in the Muslim cosmography and religious beliefs. They have also served as inspiration for countless theologians and mystics. What is furthermore significant is that this celestial garden called *janna* is, of course, the Muslim rendition of Gan Eden, the biblical garden of Paradise" (MacDougall and Ettinghausen, *The Islamic Garden* 6). "Indeed one can understand neither the Islamic garden nor the attitude of the Muslim toward his garden until one realizes that the terrestrial garden is considered a reflection or rather an anticipation of Paradise" (MacDougall and Ettinghausen, *The Islamic Garden* 90).

In Bahá'í scripture, various passages touch on this biblical imagery. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, for example, urges people to think of humankind with aims that are "all-inclusive" and to moderate human character so that "this world may turn into a Garden of Eden" (*Selections* 69). In an address to the readers of the *Christian Commonwealth* (January 1913) he wrote:

The Lord of all mankind hath fashioned this human realm to be a Garden of Eden, an earthly paradise. If, as it must, it findeth the way to harmony and peace, to love and mutual trust, it will become a true abode of bliss, a place of manifold blessing. . . .  
(*Selections* 275)

Perhaps, the most historically significant link between the Genesis symbolism and eschatological fulfillment in the Bahá'í Faith is Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of his divinity in 1863 in the presence of his closest companions. This declaration took place in a garden he chose to designate the "Garden of Ridván," which means the garden of "paradise." Five years previously, Bahá'u'lláh had also revealed these verses:

Have ye forgotten that true and radiant morn, when in those hallowed and blessed surroundings ye were all gathered in My presence beneath the shade of the tree of life, which is planted in the all-glorious paradise? Awe-struck ye listened as I gave utterance to these three most holy words: O friends! Prefer not your will to Mine, never desire that which I have not desired for you, and approach Me not with lifeless hearts, defiled with worldly desires and cravings. Would ye but sanctify your souls, ye would at this present hour recall that place and those surroundings, and the truth of My utterance should be made evident unto all of you. (*Hidden Words* 27–28)

In this passage, the future restoration of paradise is moved from future time into the potential present time of every believer. Here we have the tree of life in paradise and God's presence. Obedience to the basic command is expounded on in relation to divine priority and purpose, as well as human intention. Through obedience and sanctification, the believer is able to recall the primal paradise. With reference to the dawning of the Bahá'í dispensation, Bahá'u'lláh writes that the earth has "been made the footstool of . . . God" and that "the All-Merciful hath directed His steps towards the Ridván and entered it. Guide, then, the people unto the Garden of Delight which God hath made the Throne of His Paradise" (quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 154). This verse suggests\_ the fulfillment of prophecies from the New Testament Book of Revelation. The prophecies are interpreted in historic relation to both the inauguration of the Bahá'í Faith and individual faith.

Another significant link between Bahá'í scripture and biblical eschatology that is rooted in the symbolism of Genesis concerns the appearance of the "Day" of God. According to Genesis, God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day God rested. Within Jewish thought and tradition this creation–rest sequence had a prophetic counterpart in human history. Each day signified one thousand years. After six days, that is, six thousand years of human history, there would be a thousand years of rest. This period of rest signified a period of peace, when there would be no more war and unhappiness. This ancient interpretation also appears to provide structure to New Testament eschatology. The second epistle of St. Peter confirms the 1000 year=Day of God equation (2 Pet. 3:8, cf. Qur'án 32:4, 40:7). The New Testament epistle to the Hebrews speaks on

the same theme (Heb. 4:8–11), and finally the Book of Revelation refers to a thousand-year messianic reign in which there is no more war (Rev. 20:2–7).

The above prophecies captured the attention of Christians in the nineteenth century because biblical chronology suggested that six thousand years of human (biblical) history were drawing to a close, thus indicating the immanence of the “Day” of God, the thousand years of peace, or millennial kingdom and return of Christ. It was this belief that inspired the creation of the “Seventh-Day Adventist” Church.<sup>48</sup> Notable scriptural links between these eschatological beliefs and the Bahá’í Faith are Bahá’u’lláh’s claim that the “Day” of God has dawned and his statement that his dispensation will span at least a thousand years before the dawn of a new prophetic dispensation (see Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 346).

These points show the link between the biblical symbolism of the primal garden and clearly indicate the aspiration of the Bahá’í Faith for this age. The goal of religion is to restore the mythical lost paradise, both for the individual and, in the long term, for humankind collectively. With this in mind, it is worth considering some aspects of the original primal garden. Some of the most noteworthy characteristics of the original paradise were (1) close communion with God, (2) equality between the sexes, (3) custodianship of the garden, and (4) vegetarianism. Each of these points finds concrete expression in Bahá’í teachings for this age. The following is only a brief outline and analysis since these topics are too involved to be examined here fully:

**(1) Close Communion with God:** Bahá’u’lláh stresses the essential steps of prayer, sanctification, purgation, and illumination that mark the path to close communion with God (for example, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 3–4, 192–200). He also emphasizes the transcendence of God above all concepts such as gender, with the words, “the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute” (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 98) and the immanence of God through the revelation of God’s attributes in the world of being, both through God’s Prophets (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 139ff.) and the cosmos itself:

whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most great Light. (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 100)

Although Bahá’í symbolism is characterized mostly by dualistic tendencies, in reality, when Bahá’u’lláh speaks of the Essence of God, he paradoxically negates both dualism and monism:

He standeth exalted beyond and above all separation and union, all proximity and remoteness. No sign can indicate His presence or His absence. . . . (Bahá’u’lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 98)

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<sup>48</sup> How the biblical chronology, which involves such mythological narratives as the creation of Adam and which suggests that Adam was created some six thousand years ago, could interact with objective historical time is an enigma. Was the chronological structure of biblical myths and narrative symbolism revealed together in the texts as a prophecy, or was it all a coincidence? This question will probably never be answered to the satisfaction of both religious believers and critical secular scholars.

The way of communion and experiencing God is through the religious path of sanctification, prayer, following the divine teachings, and attaining spiritual illumination. The teachings, the law, and spiritual illumination itself are symbolized as a celestial maiden, the beloved of every soul:

Consider how all created things eloquently testify to the revelation of that inner Light within them. Behold how within all things the portals of the Ridván [Garden] of God are opened, that seekers may attain the cities of understanding and wisdom, and enter the gardens of knowledge and power. Within every garden they will behold the mystic bride of inner meaning enshrined within the chambers of utterance in the utmost grace and fullest adornment. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán* 140)

(2) **Equality between the Sexes:** The subordination of women was the result of the Fall (Gen. chap. 3), which placed humankind in a world order characterized by enmity and violence, a world in which social hierarchy was determined by superior physical strength. It is, of course, a matter of historical fact that this biblical hierarchy remained in place throughout recorded history only to be seriously challenged with the emergence of this age—an age Bahá'u'lláh teaches to be the age in which both the Garden of God and the equality of the sexes are to be established (or reestablished) on earth. In a talk recorded in Paris, 'Abdu'l-Bahá speaks of “the not far distant future” when “the world of women will become all-refulgent and all-glorious” (*Paris Talks* 182). And, on another occasion, he stated:

The happiness of mankind will be realized when women and men coordinate and advance equally, for each is the complement and helpmeet of the other. (*Promulgation* 182)

And again:

the new age will be an age less masculine and more permeated with the feminine ideals, or, to speak more exactly, will be an age in which the masculine and feminine elements of civilization will be more evenly balanced. ('Abdu'l-Bahá quoted in Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* 149)

(3) **Custodianship of the Environment:** Bahá'u'lláh writes that all people “have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (*Gleanings* 215) but warns that, “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” (*Gleanings* 342–43). This statement indicates that some form of management and moderation must be taken into consideration.

Two aspects of Bahá'í teaching that have direct impact on the question of responsible stewardship are individual spirituality and social unity. Bahá'í teachings address the source of many of the world's ecological problems by redirecting society from materialism to a more spiritual basis. Concerning unity and cooperation, Bahá'u'lláh called for a “vast” and “all-embracing assemblage” to “consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men.” He regarded such peace as a prerequisite for the “tranquillity of the world and the advancement of its peoples” (*Gleanings* 249). Today's ecological crisis is deeper than the obvious environmental vandalism of factories pouring waste into streams; polluting transportation modes, methods of food production, and waste disposal—are all part of a

systemic problem. Such problems require solutions that are coordinated on both the local and global scale. Both these issues, individual spirituality and the means of developing social unity, are central aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings.

(4) **Vegetarianism:** Many environmentalists have argued that the consumption of animal meat is not a sustainable way to feed the world's human population. Referring to vegetarianism, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that people are "not in need of meat" nor "obliged to eat it" (from *Compilation of Compilations* 1:462).<sup>49</sup> He insisted that according to the primal order created by God, humans were intended to be vegetarians and that "God determined the food of every living being, and to eat contrary to that determination is not approved" (*Compilation of Compilations* 1:462). Arguing from anatomy, he states that it is "evident and manifest" that the food of human beings is "cereals and fruit" (*Compilation of Compilations* 1:462). In 1912, during a visit to the Church of the Ascension in New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked, "What will be the food of the united people?" to which he responded:

As humanity progresses, meat will be used less and less, for the teeth of man are not carnivorous. . . . When mankind is more fully developed, the eating of meat will gradually cease. (*Promulgation of Universal Peace* 170–71)

Today more and more people have already embraced or are at least moving in the direction of vegetarianism. People are less able complacently to accept the moral implications of killing animals to satisfy the unnecessary habit of consuming meat, especially as it is becoming increasingly clear that meat consumption and deforestation are often closely linked.

In addition to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's recommending vegetarianism and indicating that it was the direction humankind was advancing toward, Bahá'í scripture contains many passages that concern animal rights. Bahá'u'lláh stressed kindness to animals as a prerequisite for true seekers wishing to discover the "City of Certitude [God]" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 194, 197), which is a symbolic equivalent for the primal paradise. Concerning animals, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

O ye beloved of the Lord! The Kingdom of God is founded upon equity and justice, and also upon mercy, compassion, and kindness to every living soul. . . .

Briefly, it is not only their fellow human beings that the beloved of God must treat with mercy and compassion, rather must they show forth the utmost loving-kindness to every living creature. (*Selections* 158)

From the perspective of the above observations and arguments, there is no need to reject the Genesis myth, duality, or all forms of hierarchy. The Genesis myth sets forth the ideal and thereafter delineates history from a point of view that acknowledges human corruption (i.e., oppression, enmity, sexism, carnage), and then, through the later eschatological vision of scripture,

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<sup>49</sup> Vegetarianism is recommended and defended by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but the practice is not made into a law in Bahá'í teachings. It is perhaps parallel in some respects to how slavery is dealt with in the New Testament. That is, the Bahá'í Faith appears to initiate reform within the constraints of what can be achieved without jeopardizing the whole program. Social and environmental conditions also vary, producing circumstances where meat consumption is necessary to survival and health (for example, Inuit culture). Such circumstances are, however, isolated and exceptional. The greater mass of the human population is concentrated in urban environments where vegetarianism is feasible and where the increasing consumption of meat can be linked to the depletion of quality grain stock to poorer regions (in order to feed livestock instead of people), the deforestation of wilderness areas, and cruelty to animals.



a new hope of this paradise restored is offered one which Bahá'u'lláh's new world order seeks to realize. Rather than reject the Genesis myth, it can be carried to its eschatological conclusion.

## Conclusion

The above survey demonstrates the ancient and biblical roots of Bahá'í cosmological symbolism. The critique and arguments of feminists and environmentalists show the extent to which some people believe cosmological language and beliefs influence human activity. If cosmological language has the power to influence how people live and view the world, it stands to reason that there is an intrinsic value in cosmological symbolism, even if such symbolism is ultimately quite different from ontological reality. The confessed indescribability of God, for example, did not prevent God from being described in scripture in a way that is *meaningful* to human beings. This “meaningfulness” is one way of understanding why such scriptural cosmological descriptions exist. From this perspective, scriptural cosmology can be viewed in an historical-experiential context-not as literal descriptions of reality but as systems of belief that are used to instruct and further spiritual development. The value of such cosmological symbolism springs from the experience of those who accept it as “true” and are influenced and transformed by this acceptance.

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