

The Spiritual Role of Art

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Abstract

A study of passages from the Bahá'í writings indicates that art can render services of a mystical, moral, and social nature. Such services taken together constitute the spiritual role of art, whose highest purpose is to ennoble the individual soul and the collective life of humanity. When playing such a role, art draws its inspiration from the vision of life unfolded in divine Revelation, harmonizes with the fundamental teachings of the world's major religions, and seeks to reinforce their original objective, which is to foster spiritual growth and social harmony. In realizing a spiritual role, art employs beauty, whose purpose both in the world of creation and in the realm of human creativity is to attract the soul toward its Creator and to draw it into a spiral or spiritual growth. Art also employs emotion, which can reinforce the various facets of the service art renders.

Résumé

L'examen d'extraits d'écrits bahá'ís nous révèle que l'art peut remplir des fonctions de nature mystique, morale ou sociale. Considérées dans leur ensemble, ces diverses fonctions constituent le rôle spirituel de l'art, dont l'objectif le plus élevé est d'ennoblir l'âme humaine et la vie collective de l'humanité. En remplissant ce rôle spirituel, l'art tire son inspiration de la vision de la vie que nous permet de découvrir la Révélation divine; il s'harmonise avec les enseignements fondamentaux des grandes religions du monde et cherche à renforcer leur objectif initial, qui est de favoriser la croissance spirituelle et l'harmonie sociale. Pour accomplir ce rôle, l'art appelle à la beauté, celle-ci ayant pour but—dans le monde de la création tout comme dans le domaine de la créativité humaine—d'attirer l'âme vers son Créateur et de l'entraîner dans une spirale de croissance spirituelle. L'art fait également appel aux émotions, celles-ci pouvant servir à renforcer les diverses facettes du rôle que l'art peut jouer.

Resumen

Un estudio de pasajes de los escritos bahá'ís demuestra que el arte puede proporcionar servicios de índole místico, moral, y social. Tomados en conjunto, tales servicios constituyen el rol espiritual del arte, cuyo propósito más elevado es el de ennobrecer al alma individual y la vida colectiva de la humanidad. Al desempeñar tal papel, el arte cobra inspiración de aquella visión de la vida puesta en claro por la Revelación divina armoniza con las enseñanzas fundamentales de las religiones principales del mundo, y busca reforzar su propósito original, el de promover el crecimiento espiritual y la armonía social. Al efectuar un rol espiritual, el arte se vale de la belleza, cuyo propósito, tanto en el mundo de la creación como en el reino de la creatividad humana es el de atraer el alma hacia su Creador, encaminándola hacia un espiral de desarrollo espiritual. El arte también emplea la emoción, la cual puede reforzar las varias facetas del servicio que el arte provee.

The Bahá'í writings make numerous references to the arts, and from these references we can attempt to glean a conception of the nature and ideal role of art. In this discussion, the term "art" will be used broadly to refer to practices such as painting, poetry, dance, and music, as well as to the design arts such as architecture, industrial design, and fashion design. In addition, art is considered to encompass crafts such as pottery, stained-glass setting, and rug-weaving. The following passages from the Writings refer to all kinds of art and indeed apply to all skills and sciences as well. Regarding the nature of the arts and sciences, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

What bounty greater than this that science should be considered as an act of worship and art as service to the Kingdom of God. (*Selections* 145)

In this great dispensation, art (or a profession) is identical with an act of worship and this is a clear text of the Blessed Perfection. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 377)

In one of his talks, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated:

...In the Bahá'í Cause arts, sciences and all crafts are (counted as) worship.... Briefly, all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. (*Paris Talks* 176–77)

That the arts and sciences must be of benefit to humankind was emphasized by Bahá'u'lláh in the Tablet of Maqsúd:

Of all the arts and sciences, set the children to studying those which will result in advantage to man, will ensure his progress and elevate his rank. (*Tablets* 168)

To learn the arts and sciences is “the greatest glory of mankind,” but, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained, only when a certain condition is met:

Although to acquire the sciences and arts is the greatest glory of mankind, this is so only on condition that man's river flow into the mighty sea, and draw from God's ancient source His inspiration
...By the one true God! If learning be not a means of access to Him, the Most Manifest, it is nothing but evident loss. (*Selections* 110)

The arts and sciences depend upon the pervasive grace of the Manifestation of God, so much so that they owe their very existence and life to the Manifestation. To this effect, Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

The Sun of Truth is the Word of God upon which dependeth the education of those who are endowed with the power of understanding and of utterance. It is the true spirit and the heavenly water, through whose aid and gracious providence all things have been and will be quickened. Its appearance in every mirror is conditioned by the colour of that mirror. For instance, when its light is cast upon the mirrors of the hearts of the wise, it bringeth forth wisdom. In like manner when it manifesteth itself in the mirrors of the hearts of craftsmen, it unfoldeth new and unique arts. (Bahá'u'lláh, previously untranslated tablet, courtesy of Bahá'í World Centre)

To the same effect, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is quoted in *Star of the West* as having said:

The Divine Teachers have the innate Light; They have knowledge and understanding of all things in the universe, the rest of the world receives its light from Them, and Through Them the arts and sciences are revived in each age. (22.3: 87)

On another occasion, 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicated that the radiance of the arts is but a reflection of Bahá'u'lláh's divine and all-encompassing knowledge: “Again among His signs is the dawning sun of His knowledge, and the rising moon of His arts and skills ...” (*Selections* 15).

When in London, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was reported to have said the following regarding the influence of the Holy Spirit and the highest purpose of art:

All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the Light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvellous pictures. These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God. (Quoted in Blomfield, *Chosen Highway* 167)

The principle that art is a form of worship is applied to a specific art form in the following passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

I rejoice to hear that thou takest pains with thine art, for in this wonderful new age, art is worship. The more thou strivest to perfect it, the closer wilt thou come to God. What bestowal could be greater than this, that one's art should be even as the act of worshipping the Lord? That is to say, when thy fingers grasp the paint brush, it is as if thou wert at prayer in the Temple. (“Extracts” 2)

The idea that the arts have to do with the worship and glorification of God is also reflected in a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice:

... Our Sacred Writings confirm it [music] as one of the great arts by which mankind can express its worship of God and joy in His creation It is from their [Bahá'í artists'] desire to glorify God through their creative activities that new arts and sciences will gradually develop to enrich a new culture. (Unpublished letter, dated 22 February 1980)

Running throughout the above passages like golden threads are three themes regarding the nature and purpose of the arts and sciences. We might summarize them as follows: All arts and sciences are for the worship and glorification of God; the arts and sciences should be a means of access to God; and arts and sciences should be of service to humankind. In reality, these are but different ways of saying the same thing. For in the Bahá'í teachings, the worship of God, the gaining of divine knowledge, and pure-hearted service to humanity are inseparably woven together in the golden brocade of spiritual growth. We saw in a quotation above how 'Abdu'l-Bahá equated worship with service. In the following passages, moreover, Bahá'u'lláh reveals that the knowledge of God and access to God depend upon one's deeds, upon one's observance of the divine teachings. Since the teachings are concerned with humankind's spiritual and social well-being, to observe the teachings is to render service:

The first Tajallí [Effulgence] which hath dawned from the Day-Star of Truth is the knowledge of God-exalted be His glory. And the knowledge of the King of everlasting days can in no wise be attained save by recognizing Him Who is the Bearer of the Most Great Name [Bahá'u'lláh].... Attainment unto the Divine Presence can be realized solely by attaining His presence.... True belief in God and recognition of Him cannot be complete save by acceptance of that which He hath revealed and by observance of whatsoever hath been decreed by Him and set down in the Book by the Pen of Glory. (*Tablets* 50)

For man's knowledge of God cannot develop fully and adequately save by observing whatsoever hath been ordained by Him and is set forth in His heavenly Book. (*Tablets* 268)

By emphasizing deeds, Bahá'u'lláh obliges the individual to make effort, to develop personal potential, to grow spiritually toward the fulfillment of the purpose for which each was created—to know and to worship God.¹ In this light, all the foregoing appears to resolve itself into one principle: the common, the most general and fundamental aim of the arts and sciences, indeed of all human endeavors, however material or mundane they may seem, is to foster spiritual growth.

Art as a Means of Ennoblement

Beyond this general principle, however, questions arise. How is God worshipped and glorified through the arts? How are the arts a means of access to God and a service to humankind? How can the arts foster spiritual growth?

In the Bahá'í teachings, the arts are associated with certain spiritual and educational roles that have mystical, moral, and social facets. In one of his talks 'Abdu'l-Bahá was recorded as saying, "Music is an important means to the education and development of humanity...." He immediately added:

...but the only true way is through the Teachings of Gael. Musk is like this glass.... and the Teachings of God, the utterances of God, are like the water. When the glass or chalice is absolutely pure and clear, and the water is perfectly fresh and limpid, then it will confer Life.... (*Bahá'í Writings* 8)

A conversation 'Abdu'l-Bahá held with an actor, while in London, was described by a believer as follows:

An actor mentioned the drama, and its influence. "The; drama is of the utmost importance." said 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "It has been a great educational power in the past; it will be so again." He described how as a young boy he witnessed the Mystery Play of 'Alí's Betrayal and Passion, and how it affected him so deeply that he wept and could not sleep for many nights. (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 93)

The far-reaching implications of this statement seem worthy of consideration. For the drama is not a single art form but usually a combination of two or more. Traditionally it can, and in many parts of the world does involve poetry or dramatic prose, dance, music, and several auxiliary arts. Part of the "educational power" of such arts lies in their ability to probe the significance and preserve the memory of important historical events, to reinforce the divine

teachings and exhortations, to demonstrate the consequences of obedience or disobedience to spiritual law, and to reveal the human soul in action—the process of spiritual growth. In short, such arts share with other arts the ability to impart an understanding of spiritual reality, and this is one way they meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s requirement that the arts and sciences be “a means of access to Him, the Most Manifest.” In so doing, they render a service on a mystical plane; that is to say, they help strengthen the relation between humanity and its heavenly king.

A further example of the service the arts can render on the physical plane is given in the following passage, in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to music as a means of helping to draw the souls toward the radiant Source of divine love:

Thank thou God that thou art instructed in music and melody, singing with pleasant voice the glorification and praise of the Eternal, the Living. I pray to God that thou mayest employ this talent in prayer and supplication, in order that the souls may become quickened, the hearts may become attracted and all may become inflamed with the fire of the love of God! (*Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* 512; *Bahá’í Writings* 3)

However, on a moral plane, where the relation between artist and public is involved, another kind of service comes to light. As expressed by the Universal House of Justice:

...music, art, and literature ... are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls.... (*Bahá’í World* 18:358)

Moreover, viewed in its educational role as an edifying and uplifting power, art finds its moral responsibilities implied in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s outline of the cardinal principles underlying Bahá’í education “from the cradle up to the age of manhood.” One of the principles, he said, is

service to the cause of morality, raising the moral tone of the students, inspiring them with the sublimest ideals of ethical refinement, teaching them altruism, inculcating in their lives the beauty of holiness and the excellency of virtue and animating them with the excellences and perfections of the religion of God. (Quoted in *Star of the West* 9.9: 98)

Since the Bahá’í Faith aims to provide spiritual and moral education to the whole of humanity, the above passage will be seen to apply not only to students but also to people of whatever age or occupation, and bears relevance not only to academic curricula but also to the educational aspect of art.

At yet another level—the social plane, involving human relations—the arts have a vital service to render: that of helping to unite humankind. On this theme, Bahá’u’lláh wrote:

The source of crafts, sciences and arts is the power of reflection. Make ye every effort that out of this ideal mine there may gleam forth such pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth. (*Tablets* 72)

This power of reflection, the source of the arts, is one of the faculties the Creator has bestowed upon human beings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, too, said such powers should be employed for the attainment of human unity:

The truth is that God has endowed man with virtues, powers and ideal faculties.... We must thank God for these bestowals, for these powers He has given us, for this crown He has placed upon our heads.

How shall we utilize these gifts and expend these bounties? By directing our efforts toward the unification of the human race. We must use these powers in establishing the oneness of the world of humanity.... (*Foundations* 62)

Turning again to the educative influence of the arts, we find that social harmony and world unity are also included in the above-cited outline of educational aims given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Education must seek

the elimination of the causes of ignorance and social evils.... [and] service to the oneness of the world of humanity; so that each student may consciously realize that he is a brother to all mankind, irrespective of religion or race. (*Star of the West* 9.9: 98)

The arts are especially well suited to promote unity, the central theme of the Bahá'í Revelation. First, when addressed to the spiritual life of humanity, the arts can highlight that which is universal. Second, their influence can be far-reaching: a single work of art may touch the lives of thousands, even millions of people, and in some cases may continue to do so for centuries. And third, as time goes on, the cumulative effect of the work of thousands of Bahá'í artists can be expected to contribute substantially to the emergence of a world environment, a world climate of thought and feeling with which all peoples feel themselves identified.

The Bahá'í teachings appear to indicate, in sum, that the principal aims and highest aspirations of the arts are as follows:

- On a mystical plane, to impart spiritual knowledge, attract the souls to the beauty of the All-Glorious, and brighten the flame of God's love;
- On a moral plane, to "represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations," foster a desire for moral excellence and obedience to the divine teachings, and "be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls";
- On a social plane, to promote social well-being, harmony, world unity, and universal brotherhood.

These aims apply to the arts that are called "the fine arts." They also appear to characterize the spiritual side of the service rendered by the design arts and the crafts. In other words, they apply as much to urban design as to poetry, as much to rug-weaving as to music. It is in realizing such aims that the arts glorify and become a means of access to God, render a service to humanity, and foster spiritual growth.

It would be an error to consider that the mystical aims are spiritual while the moral and social ones are not. All three aims are spiritual in nature and are integral parts of what we could call the spiritual role of art. For in the Bahá'í teachings, as we have seen, worship, morality, and social relations are inseparable parts of a way of life. Indeed, it is through a divinely ordained, world-embracing administrative and social order that the Bahá'í Faith channels and incarnates the bounties of a life-giving Spirit, thereby regenerating the spiritual life of the millions of individuals who constitute the body of its world community (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 9, 18; *God Passes By* 324).

Due to their ability to render services of a mystical, moral, and social nature, the arts constitute an effective means of conveying spiritual teachings to the public. For in realizing such services, the arts are, directly or indirectly, making divine precepts known throughout society, diffusing the spirit of oneness and helping to deepen the understanding, the love, unity, and faith of humankind. The great potential of the arts in this domain was described in a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi:

The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.

We have to wait only a few years to see how the spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh will find expression in the work of the artists. What you and some other Bahá'ís are attempting are only faint rays that precede the effulgent light of a glorious morn. (From a letter dated 10 October 1932, to an individual believer. Quoted in *Lights of Guidance* 98, with corrections provided by the Universal House of Justice in a letter to the author, dated 5 December 1990)

Let us attempt to summarize. Art can impart a knowledge of things divine; it can also stir yearning for the Kingdom, strengthen faith in God, help instill fear of God's justice and hope for his mercy, and fan the flame of the love of his beauty; and it can, thereby, affect the will to act, to obey God's commandments, and to live in harmony with God's teachings, which are the essence of morality and the source of spiritual growth. In so doing, art assists humankind to attain the very purpose of its existence: to know and to worship God. Toward this end, moreover, art can promote the formation of praiseworthy character; can disseminate the divine teachings; can strengthen, through its unifying influence, the bonds of harmony and human fellowship; and can reinforce throughout the world the sense of common identity shared by members of the Bahá'í community.

All such services can be implied, in a word, by saying that art has to do with ennoblement: its highest purpose is to ennoble the individual soul and the collective life of humanity.

Art and Religion

The reader familiar with the Bahá'í teachings will note that the ideal aims of art outlined above are in fact among the principal objectives of the Bahá'í Faith itself and that these aims harmonize with the spiritual values upheld by the teachings of the world's major religions. What is the explanation of this unity of purpose? It is that art, when quickened by the spirit and teachings of religion, reflects (on an infinitely lower level) the generative process set into

motion by the Word of God and attempts in its humble way to reinforce the spiritual and social handiwork of the Almighty. This is the principle implied in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "music is an important means to the education and development of humanity, but the only true way is through the Teachings of God" (*Bahá'í Writings* 8). This is also the reason why the arts, throughout the history of civilization, and particularly during its spiritual high tides, have been intimately associated with religion.

Here, though, one needs to distinguish between religion and religious community. In speaking of religion as a whole, our focus is not upon the institutions, dogmas, superstitions, rites, or customs associated with particular historical communities. Our focus is rather upon the body of spiritual and moral teachings that constitute the essence and common foundation of religion, as revealed by the Messengers of God. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Religion ... is not a series of beliefs, a set of customs; religion is the teachings of the Lord God, teachings which constitute the very life of humankind, which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honour. (*Selections* 52–53)

It is true that art, throughout history, has been placed in the service of the dogmas, superstitions, and customs of particular communities. But parallel with this, art has been employed to reinforce the fundamental spiritual aims of religion as defined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

It is also true that some religious authorities, at some points in history, have imposed their views and their will on artists and obliged them to serve the interests of religious institutions. But that alone would not explain the worldwide and long-enduring intimacy between religion and art. The intimacy, rather, is a spontaneous outcome of the awe or the love artists have borne toward the Creator (however diverse the forms in which they have conceived of that Creator), recognizing in religion a reservoir of God's grace to humankind, acknowledging that in the spiritual and moral teachings of religion are found the fountain and the bedrock of their civilization, and desiring to promote, by embodying such teachings in their works of art, the highest interests of their fellows.

Since the sixteenth century, the arts in the West have steadily drifted away from a religious viewpoint—a process that in the twentieth century has spread to most parts of the world. Humanity, having turned away from God, has fallen into a spiritual and moral decline and now descending to its utter depths. The Universal House of Justice indicated that the arts have not escaped the effects of the general chaos this spiritual decline has unleashed:

Every discerning eye clearly sees that the early stages of this chaos have daily manifestations affecting the structure of human society; its destructive forces are uprooting time-honoured institutions.... The same destructive forces are also deranging the political, economic, scientific, literary, and moral equilibrium of the world and are destroying the fairest fruits of the present civilization.... Even music, art, and literature, which are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations and should be a source of comfort and tranquillity for troubled souls, have strayed from the straight path and are now the mirrors of the soiled hearts of this confused, unprincipled, and disordered age. (From a circular letter, dated 10 February 1980, published in *Bahá'í World* 18: 358)

For the Universal House of Justice to have made such a strongly worded generalization, the decline blighting present-day society must have affected the spiritual and moral content of art to a high degree. If what constitutes religion, according to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, are divine teachings "which urge high thoughts upon the mind, refine the character, and lay the groundwork for man's everlasting honour," then art such as that described above would have to be considered either irreligious or non-religious. Nonetheless, even in the twentieth century, a significant number of works of art can be found that reflect the higher inclinations of the human spirit, inclinations "towards transcendence, a reaching towards an invisible realm, towards the ultimate reality, that unknowable essence of essences called God" (Universal House of Justice, "To the Peoples" 5). The current state of affairs, then, does not disprove that the bond between art and religion is natural, vital, and timeless; rather, it simply indicates that present-day civilization has descended spiritually to a low-water mark and that the nonreligious attitude currently reflected in the greater part of art constitutes one of the transient exceptions to a rule that has prevailed throughout thousands of years of world history. The matter is confirmed by the history of the arts in the various regions of the world.²

With respect to existing primitive societies and to prehistoric peoples, in whose cases a history of art is impossible to construct, anthropology adds its confirmation that, on the evidence available, art and religious belief have universally gone hand in hand. In sum: the traditional arts of Oceania, of sub-Saharan Africa, of the pre-Columbian Americas, of Islamic domains, of Christendom, of ancient Greece and Rome, of the ancient Near East, and of the peoples of South Asia, Central Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Far East, one and all give eloquent

testimony to the abiding service art has rendered to the spiritual and moral aims of religion. In its highest role, art is a handmaiden of divine truth.

What observations could be made regarding the relation between religion and art, in the case of the Bahá'í Faith? First, the important distinction between religion and religious community should again be drawn.³ In its relation with the Bahá'í Faith, the Bahá'í world community has a favorable position. The writings of Bahá'u'lláh and those of the authorized interpreters of his Word provide for an institutional order that guides the affairs of the Bahá'í community. The Writings stipulate the few, simple rites that are observed; preclude the formation of rigid, divisive dogmas; and shield the community against schism by means of an explicit and inviolable Covenant. While such measures are indispensable and greatly aid the community in approaching the spiritual ideals upheld by the Bahá'í teachings, it should nonetheless be remembered that the religion and its followers are different entities. One needs to distinguish, then, between the Bahá'í Faith and the Bahá'í community. The artist's relation with the divine teachings of the Bahá'í Faith is one matter; the artist's relation to the Bahá'í community is another.

Another important aspect of religion, as conceived of in the Bahá'í teachings, is that it envelops the whole of human life. For many, this is a difficult notion to accept. The world has grown accustomed, in the twentieth century, to seeing a wide gulf between religion and other human concerns. Indeed, many have come to regard this breach as the normal state of affairs. Yet to separate religion from the art of living has proven fatal, for the gap between the two has been filled by that materialistic view of life which Bahá'u'lláh regarded as "the chief factor in precipitating the dire ordeals and world-shaking crises" that afflict all peoples (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 125).

The Bahá'í Faith restores the vital bond between religion and daily living. 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized that deeds are the only sure proof of faith:

For in this holy Dispensation, the crowning glory of bygone age, and cycles, true Faith is no mere acknowledgment of the Unity of God, but rather the living of a life that will manifest all the perfections and virtues implied in such belief ... (*Bahá'í Yearbook* 1:12)

Further still, in the following passages revealed by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we find that every aspect of life comes under the sheltering shade of the divine teachings and that every detail of civilization derives from the creative potential latent in such teachings:

Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring balance established amongst men. In this most perfect balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 198)

... even the minutest details of civilized life derive from the grace of the Prophets of God. What thing of value to mankind has ever come into being which was not first set forth either directly or by implication in the Holy Scriptures? ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Secret* 96)

From a Bahá'í perspective, then, religion subsumes all of human life. And as art is a part of life, religion also subsumes art. This is further confirmed by Bahá'u'lláh's teaching that the arts and sciences themselves are but reflections of the knowledge of the Manifestation of God, and in each age are revived and stimulated by the leavening spirit the Manifestation releases into the world:

Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame.... Through the mere revelation of the word "Fashioner," issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 141–42)

In referring to Jesus Christ, Bahá'u'lláh gave an example of the quickening influence that the Manifestation of God exercises over all aspects of civilization, including the arts:

The deepest wisdom which the sages have uttered, the profoundest learning which any mind hath unfolded, the arts which the ablest hands have produced, the influence exerted by the most potent of rulers, are but manifestations of the quickening power released by His transcendent, His all-pervasive, and resplendent Spirit. (*Gleanings* 85–86)

Given such unequivocal teachings, to continue to regard art and religion as two separate powers, to continue to hold that art should be independent of religion, would be to perpetuate the fatal cleavage between religion and life that has undermined the basis of present-day civilization.⁴

But at this point a clarification should be made. If one says that it is in the nature of art to serve the spiritual, fundamental aims of religion, this does not imply that the content and style of the artist's work need be determined in cases by the desires of religious institutions or by the devotional tastes of religious community. (Here we see one reason why it is important to distinguish between religion and community.) Nor does it imply that one conceives of art as being constrained within the nine walls of the Bahá'í Temple. It implies, rather that one recognizes life itself as a temple without walls, the sky as a limitless dome that speaks of the Creator's sovereignty, and religion (in its renewed, purified form: the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh) as the sun that rides the dome's center, shedding light and life on all things.

Viewed from such a perspective, the domain of art would legitimately include everything under the sun, from the first cry of a newborn child to last breath of a departing soul. To make this statement is not only to affirm the right of artists to treat the entire range of human experience in their work: it is also to recall the holiness of life. It is to affirm that all aspects of life—both light and darkness, joy and suffering, triumph and setback—are contained within the framework of a divinely ordained purpose and are designed by Creator to be conducive to spiritual growth.⁵

Beauty Reflected in the Creation and in Art

It is beyond the scope of this article to attempt even a brief survey of the points of agreement and divergence between established, specific theories of beauty and the outlook derived here from Bahá'í teachings. In one case, however, we need to examine what is not so much a theory as it is a general tendency found in much of current Western thinking on beauty—a tendency that compels attention in a discussion where we are concerned with fundamental concepts.

In the West, there are several theories of beauty reflecting the idea that beauty is an end in itself, that it has no purpose outside the giving of some form of pleasure. The kind of pleasure emphasized may be sensual (as in hedonistic theory). The pleasure may be derived from the intellectual appreciation of design and pattern (as in naturalistic theory). It may arise from the recognition of artistic patterns corresponding to instinctive mental patterns (as in Gestalt theory); from an intuitive appreciation of qualitative vividness (as in contextualistic theory); from an appreciation of the work of art as an integrated organic whole (as in organistic theory); and from the recognition and appreciation of ideal forms (as in formistic theory). It may also involve satisfaction which the artist derives from the expression of emotion and the public from emotional arousal (as in expressionism). Each theory stresses a different facet of the experience of beauty, but what they have in common is the basic notion that beauty's essential characteristic is to give sensual, intellectual, or emotional pleasure without higher purpose. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, philosophers and theorists have gone to considerable lengths to elaborate upon this concept.⁶

What is the origin of this widespread, modern view of beauty? In the late Middle Ages, philosophers of Christian Europe certainly did not look upon beauty as a source of pleasure without purpose, but rather as the attractive power of spiritual perfection (Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy* 112). Is it a coincidence that modern theories viewing beauty as an end in itself emerged and were developed in the centuries following the Renaissance, when Europe drifted away from the shores of a religious world outlook into the seas of secularism and materialism?

Surely few would deny that beauty gives pleasure and that such pleasure may be of a sensual, emotional, intellectual, or even spiritual nature. In this regard, the findings of the various modern theories of beauty are most valuable for their analysis and insights into some of the ways in which beauty is experienced. Such studies, however, do not appear to go far enough. They deal intensively with the "how" of beauty, but scarcely with the "why." They focus on the ways that the experience of beauty engages the senses and the mind but offer little explanation as to what purpose this subtle and delicate process may serve except to give pleasure. The point here is to suggest that pleasure is not the end of beauty; it is only a natural part of the experience that beauty offers.⁷

The Great Architect designed the creation such that all creatures take pleasure in that which is natural to their lives. The dog enjoys romping about. The infant delights in play. The body, when tired after a day's work, is refreshed by a night of rest. In each of these instances, there is not only pleasure but also divine wisdom in the service of a higher purpose. For exercise is indispensable to the dog's health. Through play, the child develops both body and mind. And sleep affords not only a pleasant restoration but also, to the Bahá'í, a preparation, for further service. In this connection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote:

... man must become evanescent in God. Must forget his own selfish conditions that he may thus arise to the station of sacrifice. It should be to such a degree that if he sleep, it should not be for pleasure, but to rest the body in order to do better, to speak better, to explain more beautifully, to serve the servants of God and to prove the truths. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 384)

We note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not deny the pleasure involved in sleeping but held that such is not its ultimate purpose.

This principle of pleasure channeled into the service of a divine purpose would seem to apply not only to humanity's physical life but also to its higher, spiritual life:

It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful motion, a well written book, pleasing garments—in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit...

What is music? It is a combination of harmonious sounds. What is poetry? It is a symmetrical collection of words. Therefore, they are pleasing through harmony and rhythm

.... All these have in themselves an organization, and are constructed on natural law. Therefore, they correspond to the order of existence like something which would fit into a mold.... When it is so, this affects the nerves, and they affect the heart and spirit. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í Writings* 8–9)

These words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which refer to all the principal mediums (visual, spatial, gestural, verbal, and auditory) in which art is constituted, show that beauty does indeed give pleasure, in this case to “the heart and spirit.” But what higher end might such pleasure serve within the scheme of divine creation, within the framework of God's purpose for humanity? If it were to serve no such higher end, then the enjoyment of beauty in the arts would be little more than a frivolous pastime, hardly worthy of the noble distinction accorded to all arts and sciences in the Writings.

In a religious worldview, all things are found to have a reason for being. The fundamental purpose all created things have in common is to enable humankind to know and to love God:

Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, [God] ... chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation... (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 65)

Within the framework of this broad purpose, every created thing, from the humblest atom to the greatest spiritual law, has a specific role to play and an assigned purpose to fulfil. Bahá'u'lláh affirmed this ancient teaching in the following way:

... when the light of My Name, the All-Pervading, hath shed its radiance upon the universe, each and every created thing hath, according to a fixed decree, been endowed with the capacity to exercise a particular influence, and been made to possess a distinct virtue. (*Gleanings* 189)

And addressing the world of humankind, Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

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.... And My purpose in all this was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion and become worthy of My invisible bestowals, (*Hidden Words* 32)

Even the towering principle of justice—which Bahá'u'lláh called the “best beloved of all things in My sight” (*Hidden Words* 3) which he made to be the axis of the Bahá'í World Order, and whose name he gave to the supreme governing body of the Bahá'í world community—is but a means to a higher end. “The purpose or justice,” Bahá'u'lláh disclosed, “is the appearance of unity among men” (*Tablets* 67). And unity itself, the central theme of the Bahá'í Revelation, stands revealed in another passage as a means to a still further end “... unity and concord ... in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations” (*Tablets* 36) .. In view of this consistent pattern, can we doubt that beauty, too, must have some role to play?

The Bahá'í writings make many references to beauty but space permits here to consider briefly only a few passages from the divine pen of Bahá'u'lláh. In the first, there seems to be a distinction between the Beauty that is of God and the beauty found in the creation. The Beauty of God is inherently glorious primary, original; whereas that of creation is subordinate, secondary, reflected:

I beseech Thee, O my God, by Thy Beauty that shineth forth above the horizon of eternity, a Beauty before which as soon as it revealeth itself the of beauty boweth down in worship, magnifying it in ringing tones, to grant that I may die to all that I possess and live to whatsoever belongeth unto Thee. (*Bahá'í Prayers* 241)⁸

But since the Creator is “sanctified above all attributes and holy above all names” (*Bahá'í Prayers* 12), it is utterly impossible for humanity to perceive the beauty of God's essence:

Too high art Thou exalted for the eye of any creature to behold Thy beauty, or for the understanding of any heart to scale the heights of Thine immeasurable knowledge. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 88)

The most humanity can hope to perceive of a beauty that pertains to God is the beauty revealed in the attributes and perfections of God's divine Messengers, the founders of the world's great religions. Regarding the relation between such Messengers and the Supreme Creator, Bahá'u'lláh wrote:

Every one of them is a mirror of God, reflecting naught else but His Self, His Beauty, His Might and Glory, if ye will understand. All else besides them are to be regarded as mirrors capable of reflecting the glory of these Manifestations Who are themselves the Primary Mirrors of the Divine Being.... (*Gleanings* 74)

These sanctified Mirrors, these Day Springs of ancient glory, are, one and all, the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe.... The beauty of their countenance is but a reflection of His image, and their revelation a sign of His deathless glory.... By the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue all the names and attributes of God... are made manifest. (*Gleanings* 47–48)

In this connection we note that Bahá'u'lláh is often referred to in the Bahá'í sacred writings by the titles “the Blessed Beauty” and “the Ancient Beauty.”

Divine beauty stands revealed, perfect and consummate, in the Manifestations of God; but, on the level of the creation, it is reflected by each created thing in a limited way, “each according to its capacity and rank.”

... the revelations of Thy matchless Beauty have at all times been imprinted upon the realities of all beings, visible and invisible. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 63)

From the exalted source, and out of the essence of His favor and bounty He hath entrusted every created thing with a sign of His knowledge, so that none of His creatures may be deprived of its share in expressing, each according to its capacity and rank, this knowledge. This sign is the mirror of His beauty in the world of creation. The greater the effort exerted for the refinement of this sublime and noble mirror, the more faithfully will it be made to reflect the glory of the names and attributes of God, and reveal the wonders of His signs and knowledge. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 262)

Upon the inmost reality of each and every created thing He hath shed the light of one of His names, and made it a recipient of the glory of one of His attributes. Upon the reality of man, however, He hath focused the radiance of all of His names and attributes, and made it a mirror of His own Self. Alone of all created things man hath been singled out for so great a favor, so enduring a bounty. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 65)

It is important to observe that in the above passages Bahá'u'lláh equates divine beauty with “the glory of the names and attributes of God.”

Though one can know absolutely nothing of God's essence, one can, however, appreciate God's Beauty as revealed in the Messengers or Manifestations. This capacity is mentioned in the following passage, whose context is a warning that those who turn away from Bahá'u'lláh and his Revelation will be held responsible before God:

...every man hath been, and will continue to be, able of himself to appreciate the Beauty of God, the Glorified. Had he not been endowed with such a capacity, how could he be called to account for his failure? (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 143)

By the same token, when one contemplates the beauty reflected in the creation, and in the human heart itself, one finds that it leads to the same divine Source:

Every created thing in the whole universe is but a door leading into His knowledge, a sign of His sovereignty, a revelation of His names, a symbol of His majesty, a token of His power, a means of admittance into His straight Path (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 160)

The Creator's purpose in endowing humanity with the capacity to appreciate beauty is to enable the human soul to recognize and feel attracted to God and to the Manifestation. This capacity is alluded to in a passage from a prayer revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

O Lord, make me hear Thy call, and open before my face the doors of Thy heaven, so that I may see the light of Thy glory and become attracted to Thy beauty. (*Bahá'í Prayers* 62)

Deprived of such a capacity, humanity, though surrounded by the evidences of God's presence, the signs of God's dominion, and the revelation of God's attributes, would be unable to respond to them, would remain insensible to their drawing power, and would feel no attraction to them. In such a condition, we would have no desire to make divine attributes our own and to reflect them in our way of life: no desire either to know God or to grow spiritually. We would lie wrapped in a paralyzing ignorance, and all our distinctive powers would remain dormant and undeveloped. How much difference would there be, in such a case, between human and animal?⁹

Beauty may be regarded as an attracting quality that radiates from the Manifestation of God, is reflected in all of God's handiwork and is felt in the human heart as a stirring and awakening of love. Beauty, then, plays an essential role in aiding humanity to fulfil the very purpose of its existence: to know and to love God. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "Real love is impossible unless one turn his face towards God and be attracted to His Beauty" (*Bahá'í World Faith* 364).

Humanity's love of God, in turn, generates a powerful desire to obey the Creator's will. What would a person not do for someone he or she loves? To obey God for the love of his beauty requires greater spiritual maturity than does an obedience motivated solely by fear of God or by hope for divine reward (The Báb, *Selections* 77–78). Yet Bahá'u'lláh, in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, calls on humankind to aspire to such maturity:

The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty." (*Synopsis* 12)

To be sure, the Long Obligatory Prayer itself (one of the three prayers destined by Bahá'u'lláh to be regularly recited throughout the Bahá'í world for at least a thousand years) opens by supplicating God to enable the believer to perceive the Creator's beauty:

I beseech Thee by them Who are the Day Springs of Thine invisible Essence, the Most Exalted, the All-Glorious, to make of my prayer a fire that will burn away the veils which have shut me out from Thy beauty, and a light that will lead me unto the ocean of Thy Presence. (*Bahá'í Prayers* 7–8)

Towards the end of the prayer, we find that the perception of divine beauty is linked with obedience to God's will:

I entreat Thee ... to ordain that I may gaze on Thy beauty and observe whatsoever is in Thy Book. (*Bahá'í Prayers* 13–14)

The result is an ascending spiral of cause and effect: beauty calls forth love; love motivates observance of the divine teachings; observance leads to greater knowledge and understanding, and stimulates spiritual growth; while growth, in turn, increases the capacity to respond to beauty and to love God. The final objective of this ascending spiral is to enable the human soul so to attune itself to the will of God that it may, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "be to all eternity the revelation of My everlasting being" (*Hidden Words* 19).

One common and current notion of beauty is to regard it as a kind of exalted prettiness. Beauty as we have conceived of it here is not incompatible with loveliness, but it is, however, of a different order. In the Bahá'í writings, beauty is associated not merely with sensual and intellectual pleasure but with divinely revealed truth, with the spiritual principles and teachings that constitute truth insofar as we can know it, and ultimately with the attributes of God. "...the pure heart," wrote 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "becometh the mirror of the beauty of truth" (*Bahá'í World Faith* 333). Thus viewed, beauty is not an end in itself but a means to an end. Its purpose in the world of creation is to draw the human soul into a spiral of spiritual growth, carried upward on the wings of love toward the kingdom of the most great Beauty. Its purpose in the realm of human creativity is the same. Art attracts the soul, through beauty, to a work in which the knowledge of things divine is imparted, by which attitudes to life are spiritualized, morality is strengthened, and service is rendered to the cause of spiritual growth. Acting as an agent of spiritual attraction, beauty thus plays all essential role in the process whereby art seeks to help ennoble the human soul.

This is not to suggest, however, that the subject matter of Bahá'í-engendered art need always be serene, harmonious, delicate, or blissful. It is also legitimate for art to portray the workings of the lower side of human nature, provided the latter is viewed in proper relation to the higher, spiritual side. On the subject of human nature, 'Abdu'l-Bahá taught:

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone, Signs of both these natures are to be found in men. In his material aspect he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcome of his lower nature. The attributes of his Divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth, and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. If a man's Divine nature dominates his human nature, we have a saint. (*Paris Talks* 60)

Man has two aspects: the physical, which is subject to nature, and the merciful or divine, which is connected with God. If the physical or natural disposition in him should overcome the heavenly and merciful, he is, then, the most degraded of animal beings; and if the divine and spiritual should triumph over the human and natural, he is, verily, an angel. The Prophets come into the world to guide and educate humanity so that the animal nature of man may disappear and the divinity of his powers become awakened. (*Promulgation* 41)

If an artist portrays aspects of humankind's lower nature—such as antagonism, hatred, and selfish struggle—in such a way as to demonstrate the truth of what Bahá'u'lláh taught on such subjects, is this not a service as valuable as that rendered by an artist whose works are permeated with undisturbed peace? What is important is not only the subject matter but also the way the artist treats it; not only the cognitive and emotional content manifest in a work of art but also, and especially, the effect such content is intended to have on the knowledge and the feelings of the participant.

In another passage from the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we find reason to feel that art—especially the narrative arts such as literature, theater, and dance—in fulfilling an edifying role, can legitimately treat aspects of humanity's lower, animal nature:

...things are often known by their opposites. Were it not for darkness, light could not be sensed. Were it not for death, life could not be known. If ignorance did not exist, knowledge would not be a reality. It is necessary that each should exist in order that the other should have reality. Night and day must be in order that each may be distinguished. (*Promulgation* 82)

However, for art merely to display the workings of humanity's lower nature is not enough: if art is to be edifying, the portrayal needs to be placed within a spiritual context, within the framework of God's purpose in creating humankind. For it is only against such a framework that darkness can be perceived as the lack of light, evil as the absence of good. Only against such a framework can viewers, listeners, or readers of a work of art measure their own potential and be stimulated to grow spiritually. In other words, if artists refer in their work to the darker as well as the brighter side of human nature, they should try to do so in such a way as to engender within the participants' souls an experience that will aid them to journey on "the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment." In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Man must walk in many paths and be subjected to various processes in his evolution upward. Physically he is not born in full stature but passes through consecutive stages of fetus, infant, childhood, youth, maturity and old age.... Unless you have passed through the state of infancy, how would you know this was an infant beside you? If there were no wrong, how would you recognize the right? If it were not for sin, how would you appreciate virtue? If evil deeds were unknown, how could you commend good actions? If sickness did not exist, how would you understand health? Evil is nonexistent; it is the absence of good. Sickness is the loss of health; poverty, the lack of riches.... Without knowledge there is ignorance; therefore, ignorance is simply the lack of knowledge. Death is the absence of life. Therefore, on the one hand, we have existence; on the other, nonexistence, negation or absence of existence.

Briefly, the journey of the soul is necessary. The pathway of life is the road which leads to divine knowledge and attainment. Without training and guidance the soul could never progress beyond the conditions of its lower nature, which is ignorant and defective. (*Promulgation* 295–96)

The principle of making things known by their opposites has been applied in Western theater from ancient times, notably in the Greek concept of tragic drama. Consider, for example, a story about a person who was given a unique opportunity to establish justice but who exploited the chance instead for personal gain and in the end lost everything. In this story, injustice, worldly desire, and selfishness may figure prominently. If such negative qualities are presented in the light of Bahá'í teachings, however, they will be recognized as but the shadows cast by the positive qualities of justice, spiritual enkindlement, and altruism, and, if well conceived, the work may inspire in the reader or spectator a desire to attain these qualities and to shun their opposites. It is thus possible for art to be edifying even when its subject matter is apparently base, to be beautiful even when its subject matter is superficially unappealing; for beauty, as we have seen, is associated with divine truth and spiritual attributes.¹⁰

An important conclusion can be drawn from the foregoing discussion: One of the primary responsibilities of Bahá'í artists is to take care that the beliefs, values, attitudes, and emotions manifested in their art, on the one hand, and those that are intended to be stimulated and reinforced in the participant, on the other, vibrate in harmony with the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith. This is the best artists can do to make it likely that the experience their art engenders in the soul of the participant will have an ennobling effect.

Emotion in Art

Our consideration of the subject of beauty enables us now to turn to the closely related theme of emotion in art. One of the most popular and widespread views on this subject is that the purpose of art is to express the emotions of the artist or to stimulate those of the public. There is no doubt that certain feelings of artists may in fact become manifest in their work and that the emotions of the public are affected. Emotion, like beauty, is surely an important element in the experience of art. All the principal theories of art take emotion into account. But if we were to view art mainly as an opportunity to give expression to the artist's feelings, or if we were to value it primarily for the emotional stimulus it provides the public, would we not be giving disproportionate prominence to one element in the experience of art to the detriment of the others? Would we not, moreover, be losing sight of the highest aim of art, which is spiritual ennoblement?

To hold that the ultimate purpose of art is to provide emotional expression or stimulation is similar to holding that the value of beauty lies only in the pleasure it gives: in both cases means are mistaken for ends. We have seen that, according to the Bahá'í teachings, all created things serve some purpose and are a means to some further end, that of beauty being to attract the human soul toward its Creator and thereby to facilitate spiritual growth. We have seen, too, that beauty can accomplish such ends not only in the creation as a whole but in art as well. Might we not conclude that emotion, likewise, should be viewed from the perspective of its role in human life, and within the framework of the highest objectives of art?

In daily living, emotion serves to energize the mind and to activate the will. Similarly, the emotions that art seeks to elicit, if appropriately managed and channeled by the artist, can aid the artist to fulfil art's mystical aspect by stirring up a joyous attraction toward the kingdom of God. Such emotions can assist the artist to realize the moral aspect of the role of art by arousing in the public hope for God's bounty and fear of disobedience to divine law, and by imparting feelings of comfort and tranquillity to troubled souls. They can, furthermore, help the artist to render a social service by stimulating love toward humanity and sentiments of brotherhood and world unity.¹²

Emotion plays a key role in the realization of all the spiritual objectives of art, whether of a mystical, moral, or social nature. An example of its importance in the first case is found in the following passage from the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Therefore... set to music the verses and the divine words so that they may be sung with soul-stirring melody in the Assemblies and gatherings, and that the hearts of the listeners may become tumultuous and rise towards the Kingdom of Abhá in supplication and prayer. (*Bahá'í World Faith* 378)

A further example of the effect of emotion, this time on a moral plane, is afforded by Shakespeare's tragedies, whose underlying spiritual laws concerning human motivation and conduct could never be so effectively highlighted and driven home without that eloquent terror and consternation to which the violation of such truths inevitably leads. And for an illustration of the effectiveness of emotion on the social plane, we have only to observe that the linking of appropriate verse with music can inspire such sentiments of national identity and cohesion that one of the earliest acts of a newly formed State is to commission the writing of a national anthem.

In brief, emotion in art is not an end but a means. By carefully designing a work of art with the intention of inducing an experience in which the participant's emotions are selectively aroused and oriented, the artist can help ensure that the spiritual content of his or her work is effectively communicated, vividly felt, long remembered, and therefore the more likely to help broaden the vision, deepen the understanding, spiritualize the sentiments, and affect the thought and even the conduct of those who wish to receive it. Art can thereby assist the fundamentally joyous Bahá'í attitude to life, and with it the whole range of human emotions, to sail and find safe anchor in the harbor of God's remembrance.

Notes

1. In the Short Obligatory Prayer, revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the believer recites: "I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 4).

2. In some cases, during a certain period of a given civilization, the State may appear to have been a more important patron of the arts than was religion. But even when the artist worked for a king, a court, or some other temporal institution, it should be remembered that throughout the world, prior to the emergence of modern civilization, the worldview in which artists were immersed, in which they lived, and to which they gave expression in their works, was usually a religious one. The concept that art is a manifestation of cosmology is explored in Ludwig Tuman, "Toward Critical Foundations" 17–21.

3. The Universal House of Justice draws this distinction between religion and religious community: "...true religion, far from being the product solely of human striving after truth, is the fruit of the creative Word of God which, with divine power, transforms human thought and action. A Bahá'í, through this faith in, this 'conscious knowledge' of, the reality of divine Revelation, can distinguish, for instance, between Christianity, which is the divine message given by Jesus of Nazareth, and the development of Christendom, which is the history of what men did with that message in subsequent centuries; a distinction which has become blurred if not entirely obscured in current Christian theology. A Bahá'í scholar conscious of His distinction will not make the mistake of regarding the sayings and beliefs of certain Bahá'ís at any one time as being the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith is the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh: His Own Words as interpreted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian" ("Challenge and Promise" 195).

4. Shoghi Effendi wrote that science and religion are "the two most potent forces in human life" and that, in the world society anticipated in the Bahá'í writings, they "will be reconciled, will coöperate, and will harmoniously develop" (*World Order* 204). It might well be asked, therefore: if one can speak of science and religion as distinct forces, why not speak of art and religion in the same way? It should be noted that Shoghi Effendi did not state that science is independent of religion, nor did he state that the two are, in some ways, equally potent. The present writer feels the reconciling of religion and science as spoken of in the above passage, could be understood as a reconciling of two basic human powers—those of faith and of reason. When faith is not blind but is supported by reason, the result is a religion that Shoghi Effendi described as "scientific in its method" (*World Order* [1938 ed.] xi). Similarly, when reason is informed and illumined by faith, by the revealed Word of God, then science will be practiced with wisdom and will become imbued with divine and merciful qualities. In this case, then, we are viewing religion and science in the dimension of their human practice. But to acknowledge that science and religion can be reconciled and cooperate, is not necessarily to place them on the same plane. If we view religion not in its human dimension, but rather as an expression of God's will through divine Revelation, then we find religion to be preeminent. The encompassing nature of the divine foundation of religion is affirmed in the following statement made on behalf of the Universal House of Justice: "... it should never be overlooked that the Revelation of the Manifestation of God is

the standard for knowledge, and scientific statements and theories, no matter how close they may come to the eternal principles proclaimed by God's Messenger, are in their very nature ephemeral and limited" (from a letter dated 21 July 1968 to a National Spiritual Assembly). Here, again, we are led to conclude that religion envelops all of human life. And as the arts and the sciences are parts of human life, religion also subsumes the arts and sciences.

5. The painter Mark Tobey stated that Shoghi Effendi told him in a conversation that Bahá'í artists are free to produce as they wish. Care should be taken, however, not to make too much of this report: first, because it is a pilgrim note; and second, because it does not specify the nature and extent of the freedom involved. It would be unwarranted to assume, on the basis of this verbal account, that the Bahá'í Faith regards art as being independent of religion (the latter understood as a body of divine teachings). The most that can be safely concluded is that artists, if they wish, can in certain ways be independent of the religious *community*. When Bahá'í artists operate as individual economic units, the style and content of their work need not respond to the prevailing taste of the religious community or of the Faith's institutions. Historically, religious institutions often required artistic style to remain within narrow limits. In the Bahá'í community, artists are free to operate independently; even when they produce specifically for the use of the community or its institutions, there will be no official style to which their work will have to conform. Even so, it should be noted that Bahá'í artists remain responsible for the spiritual and moral implications of their work, their ultimate background of reference being the Bahá'í teachings. Moreover, the absence of an official Bahá'í art does not preclude the spontaneous development of an important body of works explicitly dedicated to religious themes. Who can say whether portraits of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, rendered with the same feelings of reverence and tender love that animated the painters of the madonna and child in previous centuries, may not become a favored subject of painting in the future?

6. For an overview of occidental theories, see Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics from Classical Greece and Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*.

7. Some theories observe that beauty has educational value because it hones sense discrimination, or psychological value because it provides a release for pent-up emotion or social value in that its employment in art can reinforce cultural identity. Such theories, however, stop short of recognizing that beauty affects not only human beings' sensory, mental, and social life but also affects, above all, the human soul. The very word *aesthe* implies a viewing of art more as a sensory and mental experience than as a spiritual one. The term therefore appears inappropriate for use in a discussion where the essential nature, purpose, and effect of beauty are held to be spiritual. Coined in the eighteenth century by the thinker Alexander Baumgarten, it takes as its root the Greek *aesthes* which in Hellenic usage meant simply sense perception or physical sensation. Its opposite is the medical term *anaesthetic*, referring to the inability to feel such physical sensation. See the article s.v. "aesthetics" in *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica; Macropaedia* 150. See also Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy* 16, 46, 64.

8. It is possible that the word *beauty*, when capitalized in Shoghi Effendi translations of the Bahá'í writings, refers in some cases to a Manifestation of God, such as Jesus, Muhammad, or Bahá'u'lláh. For the purposes of our discussion, though, it is the same whether the passage refers to divine beauty in the abstract as Manifestation of God, just as it is the same whether we speak of the sun's rays in general or as reflected in a flawless mirror. For what concerns us, here is not the individuality of the mirror, but the light.

9. In mystic theory, one finds an approach to art and beauty resembling that taken in this article. The mystic approach predominates in a large part of traditional Oriental theory and practice, notably in India and China. But even here: it should be noted that some mystic theory regards beauty primarily as a stimulus conducive to a state or ecstatic union with God or with the universe, whereas the accent in this essay is on beauty as a means to the knowledge of divine attributes and as a stimulus in the daily process of spiritual growth. For an overview of art philosophy in the Orient, see Thomas Munro, *Oriental Aesthetics*.

10. Note the parallels here with Keats, and with Oriental and medieval Christian thinking on the relation between beauty and truth. See Coomaraswamy, *Christian and Oriental Philosophy* 107–9.

11. See *Emotion: A Comprehensive Phenomenology*. See also Tuman, "Toward Critical Foundations" 30–33 for parallels between the role of emotion in cognition generally and in the cognition of art specifically.

12. We must distinguish between the emotions manifested by the work of art itself and those stirred within the person who experiences the work of art. They are often not the same. Grief expressed by actors on a stage may inspire in the spectator not grief but pity. In a novel, the fright expressed by a plotter whose scheming backfired may inspire in the reader not fear but satisfaction. (See Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art* 249–50.) Our focus here is on the emotions stirred by art within the participant.

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