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The Baha'i Faith Vision of Nature and its Relevance for a Conservation Ethic

By

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Abstract
I begin this research by identifying the root of the ecological crisis to be the dominant Western instrumentalist view of nature, which rejects the inherent value of natural objects in favor of a value based on their utility for humans. This worldview has transformed nature into an inanimate resource to be used in the pursuit of economic growth and social progress. Drawing primarily on Lynn White's renowned 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," I propose that the solution may lie in a spiritual approach to relating with the natural world, based on the recognition of common divine origins. Within this framework, nature derives its value from God rather than from humans. I then introduce the role of religion in shaping the human view of the environment and mediating the relationship between them. Religion has always been present in human society and has served as a guide for ascribing value to certain things—like human life—and inspiring moral obligation, making it a possible tool for conservation. Following this discussion, I provide an overview of the Baha'i faith and its core environmental tenets, examining the interplay of themes such as interconnectedness, responsibility, and respect as they relate to the natural world. Lastly, I look at how these teachings bring forth an ethic of care towards nature, despite the absence of animism. I use these various scriptures to show how the Baha'i attitude of care and respect toward the natural world can exist alongside the belief that humans are exceptional beings possessing souls that are essentially distinct from nature.

Keywords: Baha'i faith, Animism, religion, conservation, indigenous

The Baha'i Faith Vision of Nature and its Relevance for a Conservation Ethic

Throughout recorded human history, human societies have drawn on narratives set forth in religion to conceptualize the soul. Differing notions of what constitutes the soul and who possesses a soul have, in turn, often served to determine which beings are worthy of life and demanding of reverence and care. In the Baha'i faith, a monotheistic world religion founded in Iran in the mid-nineteenth century, the soul is envisioned as an immortal essence that exists separate from the body, but which imbues the body with its own consciousness and reason. The soul ties the material existence to the spiritual realm and draws humanity closer to God. Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í faith, taught that only humans possess immortal souls and that the vegetable and animal kingdoms, meanwhile, possess a spirit of a lower order (Landau 2002). This spirit differs from the human soul largely because it is neither rational nor immortal, meaning that it exists solely in the material realm. Being the most

recent monotheistic religion in the world, the teachings of the Baha'i faith have yet to be applied extensively to the development of a unified conservation ethic. This study, therefore, provides a systematization of its foundational spiritual and moral principles, which have the potential to reshape humanity's relationship with the natural world. My purpose is to show how the Baha'i notion of the immortal soul as being exclusively human and its possible implications for the human relationship with the natural world may be translated into a relevant framework for a conservation ethic. Specifically, I examine how Baha'i scripture can advance conservation without succumbing to the pitfalls of anthropocentrism—a central feature of monotheistic religions—and without relying on animism in order to do so. I suggest that the novelty of the Baha'i contribution is a way forward in addressing the tension between an anthropocentric conservation ethic, on one hand, and an animistic ethic on the other.

Animism, frequently presented as a tenet of various indigenous (particularly Native American) worldviews, imbues the nonhuman realm with a sacredness that renders it worthy of respect, transforming it into something that humans must protect for its own sake. In deeming all life valuable and interconnected, animistic orientations incite feelings of mutual belonging to the earth and responsibility to one another. Animism is present in a diverse array of indigenous traditions that prioritize preservation over unrestrained extraction to ensure a more balanced and harmonious relationship with the natural world. Given its roots in animism, the indigenous understanding of conservation differs vastly from the Euro-American one. The traditional hunting and subsistence practices of the Plains Indians, for instance, were generally embedded within religious frameworks which addressed animals as sentient beings. They envisioned the relationship between humans and nonhumans as being "regulated by expectations and obligations similar to those that governed relations between kin or allies" (Krech 1999, 146).

They possessed vast knowledge of their local environments and acted on this knowledge to manage resources in ways that sought to avoid waste and over-use. The indigenous vision of conservation that emerged was, thus, far more rooted in human-nonhuman relations than the Euro-American worldview allows for. Oftentimes, given the wealth of records regarding indigenous animistic religions and their long legacy of sustainability, environmental thinkers look to these traditions as a model for new approaches to conservation. However, while animism is a central feature of indigenous conservation ethics that can inform relations of respect and reciprocity and which holds vast potential as an alternative to current modes of interacting with the natural world, I believe that it is only one possibility among other traditions of care. Examining other belief systems beyond the animism of indigenous traditions—like those of monotheistic religions—may reveal alternative methods for fostering relations of care between humans and nonhumans without demanding the dramatic spiritual and ideological upheavals that are necessary for the adoption of animism. In this paper, I examine the theology of the Baha'i faith as one such possibility—one which necessitates more attainable shifts in the way humans view the universe and the role of different forms of life within it. While the Baha'i faith lacks any reference to animism in its environmental texts and views humans as the only beings that possess an immortal soul, it, nevertheless, supports the belief that God has endowed humanity with a divine responsibility to protect and care for the environment. I believe that the Baha'i faith, which has remained largely unstudied in the context of conservation, can, therefore, provide the foundations on which to build an ethic of care that ensures the just use and treatment of natural resources in ways that preserve their productivity and availability for future generations.

In my discussion of the forces that make the Baha'i faith such a promising site of inquiry in the discourse surrounding conservation, I ask the following questions: How can the Baha'i conceptualization of the soul shape the human-nature relationship? How can it render the environment sacred despite the absence of animism? How can it be adopted to advance conservation? Ultimately, I predict that an absence of animism in the Baha'i tradition does not necessarily mean an absence of care in modes of perceiving and interacting with the natural world. Instead, modes of care can arise from spiritual principles such as the belief that, like humans, nonhuman life reflects the attributes of God.

The theology of the Bahá'í faith includes significant provisions for the establishment of a more just and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. Bahá'ís see the purpose of humanity as carrying forward an "ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'llah 1952, 215)—a purpose which can only be fulfilled if the relationship between humanity and the natural world is reevaluated. This transformation is built on a new understanding of humanity's place within the universe. For Baha'is, all forms of life reflect some attributes of God, while humans, as beings endowed with rational and immortal souls, reflect all the attributes of God. In this way, despite their varying degrees of perfection, all forms of life—as reflections of one Creator—are worthy of care and respect. The belief that nature possesses divine qualities and must be treated accordingly, alongside the view that all life is interconnected and must follow the law of reciprocity, are the central tenets guiding the Baha'i vision for conservation. I, ultimately, suggest that Baha'i environmental principles may serve as a relevant site for exploring the vital role that religion can play in advancing environmental justice and combating the current climate crisis.

I begin this research by identifying the root of the ecological crisis to be the dominant Western instrumentalist view of nature, which rejects the inherent value of natural objects in

favor of a value based on their utility for humans. This worldview has transformed nature into an inanimate resource to be used in the pursuit of economic growth and social progress. Drawing primarily on Lynn White's renowned 1967 article "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," I propose that the solution may lie in a spiritual approach to relating with the natural world, based on the recognition of common divine origins. Within this framework, nature derives its value from God rather than from humans. I then introduce the role of religion in shaping the human view of the environment and mediating the relationship between them. As mentioned previously, religion (in its many forms) has always been present in human society and has served as a guide for ascribing value to certain things—like human life—and inspiring moral obligation, making it a possible tool for conservation. Following this discussion, I provide an overview of the Baha'i faith and its core environmental tenets, examining the interplay of themes such as interconnectedness, responsibility, and respect as they relate to the natural world. Lastly, I look at how these teachings bring forth an ethic of care towards nature, despite the absence of animism. I use these various scriptures to show how the Baha'i attitude of care and respect toward the natural world can exist alongside the belief that humans are exceptional beings possessing souls that are essentially distinct from nature.

It is necessary to mention, here, that while this study draws from sacred scriptures to show how Baha'is envision an environmentally-conscious world order, it does not go so far as to look at how these teachings are being implemented into action. This is due to the fact that, while religious scriptures often consider the future of the environment, calling for a more harmonious relationship between humans and nature, their practical application and implications remain stunted in the Western world, limiting the availability of data on the direct impact of religious theology on conservation. Practical solutions to the ecological crisis are, therefore, generally

looked for in other, more secular domains. Despite this, religions like the Baha'i faith have the potential to profoundly shape the way humans regard and treat the natural world. Thus, although this research remains limited to the ideological realm, focusing predominantly on the theoretical, rather than practical, dimensions of environmental conservation within the context of the Baha'i writings, I suggest that its teachings can contribute to a novel comprehensive approach to conservation that draws from relevant faith-based traditions. I believe, furthermore, that they can be adopted in both religious and secular spheres to motivate and guide the conservation of natural resources for future generations.

The conceptual framework of this paper is informed by a variety of existing academic literature in the areas of religion and ecology. I discuss the Baha'i faith in relation to historical and contemporary scholarship on the role of religion in positioning humans within the natural world. The majority of my data on the Baha'i faith is composed of direct passages from the scriptures—*Some Answered Questions*, a compilation of talks given by 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), the son of the prophet-founder and a central figure in the faith, between 1904 and 1906 which cover a variety of social, religious, and philosophical topics; *Paris Talks*, another collection of talks given by 'Abdu'l-Baha during his stay in Paris in 1911; and *The Promulgation of Universal Peace,* delivered by 'Abdu'l-Baha during his travels in the US and Canada in 1912, among others—which address the ways in which humans must envision and interact with the natural world. In the remainder of this section, I introduce some influential pieces in the field, which discuss the diverse obstacles that monotheistic religions face as they seek to contribute to a conservation ethic from an anthropocentric perspective. These include Lynn White's "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis", Hyun Min Chin's "Interreligious Dialogue toward Overcoming the Eco-Crisis", and Mary Evelyn Tucker's *The Emerging Alliance of Religion and*

Ecology, which critically examine the tendency of Christian theology to alienate humans from nonhumans and propose a transformative shift in ways of conceptualizing scripture regarding the environment. These texts effectively situate my research within a broader, ongoing discussion of the role of religion in environmental conservation. I, then, follow with a brief overview of some of the recent critiques of the cosmological approach to addressing environmental concerns—particularly those posed by Willis Jenkins and Bron Taylor. Lastly, I conclude by examining the potential contributions of the Baha'i cosmology to a conservation ethic, even in the absence of animism.

The contextual foundation for this paper consists of various perspectives that attempt to explain current environmental concerns by looking at how humans position themselves in relation to nature and how this positionality is mediated through religious traditions. Lynn White (1967) was among the first to claim that the way humans view their positionality within the natural world is a direct result of religious intervention. He placed the blame for environmental degradation on an anthropocentric worldview that originated from Judeo-Christian tradition, profoundly altering the way humans see and relate to the environment. White claimed that Christianity established a duality between man and nature that had never existed before and justified the exploitation of nature as God's will, legitimizing man's dominion over it. Christianity initiated a departure from animism towards an objectification of nature, eliminating any ideological barriers that remained towards the exploitation of the nonhuman world. White proposed that, since the source of the current ecological crisis is inherently religious, the solution must be as well. Humanity must turn, once more, to religious theology to revise false conceptions of the human-nature relationship, rejecting the notion that nature exists solely to serve human ends.

Other prominent environmental thinkers have similarly turned to religion as a way of reconfiguring the human relationship with the natural world in mutually beneficial ways. Hyun Min Choi (2009) and Mary Evelyn Tucker (1997) see the present ecological crisis as deeply embedded in anthropocentrism and the duality between humans and nature. They claim that, historically, religion-based environmental ethics have positioned humans as superior to nature and that this hierarchy can only be remedied by a shift in consciousness. Since perceptions of the environment shape the ways humans interact with it, humans must abandon dualistic views in favor of a more inclusive environmental ethic based on Christianity. While Christian theology has, in the past, been responsible for advancing a fragmented and unbalanced relationship between humans and nonhumans, it can be reconfigured to inspire a sense of stewardship and care for God's creation. Humanity must adopt a new environmental ethic, built on a radical revision of Christian theology and the human-nonhuman dualism legitimized by monotheistic religions in general, that frames humans as part of and not apart from the natural world. I draw on these scholars to show that monotheistic religions can play a fundamental role in affirming more ecological worldviews and establishing a more just environmental ethic without subscribing to the ideology of animism.

Other scholars in this field have identified the non-animistic qualities that make religion central for transforming the traditional hierarchical and dualistic human-nature relationship. According to Brian Henry Smith (2019), it is the ability of religion to render objects sacred that makes it a potent force for environmental conservation. Religious environmental theology offers spiritual motives—based on the notion that all of creation is sacred—rather than material and instrumental ones for the protection of the environment. Religion, ultimately, has the tools to make nature sacred again, just as it once served to desacralize it. This transformative capacity of

religion is crucial for inspiring an ethic of responsibility and care towards the environment. It is fundamentally rooted in the theocentric quality of monotheistic religion, which places God at the center of the universe and the rest of His creation at the periphery. Md. Abu Sayem (2019) and Abdul Mufid et al. (2023) believe that monotheistic religions are not ecocentric or anthropocentric—as thought by White—but theocentric. They assert that it is the theocentric foundation of monotheistic religion that makes it a particularly effective motivator for change. While God granted humans privileges over nonhumans, He did not give them the right to abuse the natural world because all life embodies diverse expressions of His will. Roger Gottlieb (2006) also claims that, in monotheistic religions, nature is perceived as an equal part of God's creation, which must be cared for and respected, despite the belief that humans have special privileges over all other inhabitants of the earth. The question of whether and in which regards humans are equal or superior to the rest of God's creation is of vital importance in guiding humanity's understanding of its place in the universe and shaping its interactions with the nonhuman world.

Furthermore, these scholars find that religion is crucial for nurturing new attitudes toward the nonhuman world because it calls for a departure from material pleasures in favor of spiritual fulfillment. Since religious practitioners view nature as a part of God's creation, it is their moral duty to not only coexist harmoniously with it but to protect it. Exploiting nature for one's own personal gain and profit is not conducive to the growth and prosperity of a spiritual being, which must behave according to the precepts of care and service to its fellow beings if it is to achieve spiritual fulfillment. It is in this context that Sayem (2023) calls for a new model of environmental ethics based on religion that emphasizes the interdependence of all life, believing that it can motivate people to respect the earth as a matter of faith. Humanity must recognize that

its own welfare is tied to the welfare of all of creation and that suffering caused to any part of creation results in the suffering of the whole. This research builds on the findings of these and other scholars to show how a new, spiritual approach to relating with the environment is necessary for combatting the current ecological crisis, which has arisen from antiquated secular ways of conceptualizing the natural world that are inadequate for ensuring the preservation of the earth's resources.

Despite the immense repository of scholarship in support of White's cosmological approach to conservation, however, some scholars remain skeptical. Willis Jenkins (2009), for instance, criticizes the efficacy of religious theology as a solution to environmental degradation, citing various controversies regarding whether the ecological crisis truly has its roots in religious cosmology. Specifically, within the field of environmental ethics, scholars seek to shift away from discussions on anthropocentrism and the value of nature toward "the political possibilities of civic experience" (Jenkins 2009, 284). Meanwhile, within the field of religion and ecology, critics emphasize "the pluralism of environment-related religious experience" (Jenkins 2009, 284) and insist on an expansion of the term "religion" itself. Informed by these discourses, Jenkins calls for a pluralist approach which focuses on multiple strategies for confronting the ecological crisis. He seeks a more pragmatic intervention, viewing practice, rather than belief, as the impetus for change. Other religious scholars like Bron Taylor also question White's notion of religious cosmology as the source of environmental thought. Taylor claims that the current cosmological approach to conservation disregards "relevant religious phenomena by focusing on the mainstream of global traditions to the exclusion of marginal, hybridizing, and novel religious expressions" (Jenkins 2009, 288) that are critical to religious studies. He opposes White's assumption that religion shapes human-environment relationships and, instead, claims that it is

the environment which shapes religion and that religion must, therefore, adapt to its surroundings. Like Jenkins, he asserts that action changes belief and not the other way around. Identifying a disparity between the capacities of religious tradition and the practical strategies required for conservation, Taylor calls for practical theological strategies which create "possibilities for a deeper pluralism" (Jenkins 2009, 289). Nevertheless, despite his criticisms of cosmology, the moral basis on which Taylor attempts to build his alternative approach to conservation is still derived from religious tradition. Similarly, Jenkins' practical strategies for addressing environmental concerns also draw on religious worldviews "as a resource for inventing new capacities from their moral traditions" (Jenkins 2009, 285). Theology, therefore, still has a central role to play in their alternative approaches to conservation. Furthermore, the proposition that practice shapes belief (and not vice versa) is undermined in the case of animism, as the belief that nonhumans possess spirits informs the way they are treated in traditional indigenous practice. The centrality of belief for shaping behavior is further exemplified in the case of the Baha'i faith, as it is the belief that all of creation is sacred that necessitates its proper treatment. It is evident, then, that belief lays the groundwork required for certain practices to take form.

The various authors mentioned so far have examined whether monotheistic religions have the potential to guide conservation by inciting a spiritual transformation in humanity's positionality within the natural world. I now turn to scholarship which situates the Baha'i faith more narrowly as a promising actor in the conservation movement. Richard Landau (2002) discusses the Bahá'í belief that the relationship between humanity and the natural environment must be founded on the recognition that all life is part of God's creation and is, thus, one. The concepts of world citizenship, stewardship of the earth, and interconnectedness are all central to

Baha'i theology. Baha'is believe that all of creation is a reflection of the attributes of God and must, therefore, be treated with care and respect. Nevertheless, the Baha'i faith teaches that nature was given to humans by God and, thus, exists to serve humanity. It is for this functional purpose, and not for its inherent value, that humans must protect nature (Landau 2002). Returning to the previous discussion on the qualities that render monotheistic religions particularly effective arenas for environmental change, Martin Palmer (2003) and Nigel Dudley (2005) examine how the Baha'i faith also promotes a theocentric worldview. Baha'is believe that life is dependent on harmonious relations of reciprocity, which necessitate a commitment to the just treatment of not only humans but of the natural world. These authors look at the current ecological crisis as a direct result of materialism and overconsumption, which have robbed the natural world of its inherent value and eradicated the necessity for reciprocity. In order to combat these social ills, Baha'i scripture explicitly calls for moderation in resource extraction and a prohibition on waste. Furthermore, Willis Jenkins et al. (2017) discuss the Bahá'í belief that science and religion are complementary knowledge systems. This means that, for Baha'is, the remedy for environmental degradation is not simply material but spiritual. For, while humans can reap vast material benefits from nature, it is an embodiment of the divine that must be valued and respected. I draw on these scholars to show that, while Baha'is still harbor instrumental motives for conservation, unlike dominant Western instrumentalism, they recognize the spiritual significance of nature.

Together, these sources reveal the potential of non-animistic monotheistic religions as an alternative approach to perceiving and interacting with the natural world. By bringing attention to the environmental teachings of the Baha'i faith, this research shows how diverse modes of care can be compatible even when they do not arise from a common source but converge around

shared values. The environmental teachings of the Baha'i faith, which emphasize harmony between humans and nature, are particularly fertile ground for the creation of a new environmental ethic based on the principles of interconnectedness, responsibility, and respect. For, as mentioned previously, since religious ethics shape human perceptions of the natural world, they may also be reenvisioned to produce a restorative framework of action. I believe that this framework can nurture a common understanding and appreciation for the inherent value of nature beyond the realm of religion in which it takes root. By showing how theocentric monotheistic religions, despite lacking the belief that animals have immortal souls, can inspire an appreciation of the earth as part of God's creation, this research may motivate further religious and secular involvement in the area of environmental conservation. Within the Baha'i sphere itself, I see this research as an opportunity to closely examine more-than-human dimensions of the faith that are often neglected in favor of more anthropocentric teachings.

The Cosmological Approach to the Current Ecological Crisis

Since its first appearance in human society, "the complex and multifaceted beliefs, rituals, and moral teachings known as religion" (Gottlieb 2006) have, in some way or another, informed individual and collective attitudes toward the environment. While animistic religions advance a worldview in which animals, like humans, possess consciousness and all of creation is bound together by spiritual tethers, non-animistic monotheistic religions maintain a distinction between humans and nature while often simultaneously advocating for proper consideration of nature in human activities (Mufid et al. 2023). In spite of White's criticism of Christianity and monotheistic religions in general as advancing a sort of irreducible and irreconcilable duality, religion, as a medium through which views of the natural world and human positionality within it are formed, may provide a promising avenue through which to understand "how humans think

about their role in nature, how to engage with the natural world and… how shared resources should be managed" (Smith 2019). Its centrality to social life makes it particularly fertile ground for reshaping humanity's relationship with the natural world and, ultimately, for implementing a new ethical framework based on the moral obligation to respect and care for nonhuman life.

In order to understand the role of religion in remedying the current ecological crisis, it is first necessary to identify the source of this crisis, which scholars like White and Choi believe to be the dominant instrumental vision of nature, which frames the value of nature as something granted by humans in accordance to their own demands. This worldview underlies many Western systems of production and consumption, degrading nature to simply a resource for economic development (Choi 2009). An instrumental vision, however, cannot by itself inform humans on how to engage with nature. It does not account for future concerns, but is instead capable only of providing a means for an end which must be looked for elsewhere. Conceptualizing nature only in terms of its instrumental value ensures conditions of comfort and convenience, meanwhile setting humanity on an unsustainable path towards an end that can only be predicted.

According to White, instrumentalism is a direct result of the historical shift from pagan animism to Christianity, which transformed the natural world into an object and alienated humanity from the earth on which its prosperity depended. The rise of Christianity, which framed humans as superior in the sight of God and nature as an instrument to be used by humans, eliminated all ideological barriers towards its exploitation. This dualistic perspective advanced the notion that humans, as subjects, can exploit nature for their own ends while nature, as the object, exists solely to be exploited. Christianity, thus, "not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends" (White 1967, 1205), legitimizing his dominion over it. While "formerly man had been part of

nature; now he was the exploiter of nature" (White 1967, 1205). Within this anthropocentric framework, "nature is an instrument that humans control, and preservation of nature is only a value if such preservation furthers human welfare" (Choi 2009).

The proposed religious foundations of the current ecological crisis reveal that dominant behaviors and attitudes towards nature are determined by how humans position themselves in relation to it. The current ecological crisis, which is rooted in value systems that prioritize economic growth and social progress over the preservation of the earth and its nonhuman inhabitants, is a direct result of this positionality. According to White, just as religion once served to distort this positionality, it may also be harnessed in ways that remedy the damages it inflicted. Harnessing religion for environmental ends, however, does not imply prioritizing environmental concerns over religious ones but, rather, engaging both concerns in relations of reciprocity that mutually advance their respective ends. Ultimately, the destruction of the environment is a product of not only a distorted relationship with nature, but "between us as human beings, and between human beings and God" (Choi 2009). Within this framework, the current ecological crisis requires humanity to re-envision these relationships through the lens of religion. In the remainder of this section, I examine some central features of religion that make it so fundamental for reconstructing a shared ecological future (Sherma 2022).

Religion, firstly, has the ability to establish a moral, rather than material, imperative for environmental conservation. Many monotheistic traditions are embedded with values that "provide a moral basis and spiritual motivations for protecting the environment" (Smith 2019). They teach that the material world, as part of God's creation, is intimately tied to the spiritual realm and that nature is, therefore, sacred in its own right. By recognizing the sacred status of nature, these traditions frame humans as stewards entrusted by God with the responsibility of

caring for the earth and its biodiversity (Okyere-Manu 2022). In rendering nature sacred and worthy of care, religious scriptures can beg the question of to whom humans hold a responsibility, compelling them to look beyond just themselves. These texts motivate them to abandon old modes of thought in favor of a more inclusive environmental ethic, a radical revision founded on the belief that humans are stewards of the earth endowed with a spiritual responsibility to preserve it for future generations. Religion is, therefore, crucial for "rethinking the relationship of humans to the natural world in a mutually enhancing manner" (Tucker 1997) and has the potential to bring forth an environmental ethic founded on attitudes of care.

Monotheistic religion is particularly relevant for conservation not only in its contemporary global dominance but also in the authority of God to grant nature its sacred status. Monotheistic religions have the potential to reconceptualize the instrumental value of nature so that the value of nature, even when not equal to the value of human progress, becomes God-given and, thus, inherent. Furthermore, nature is not to be used for purely human ends but for the fulfillment of God's will on earth. This is a central feature of all theocentric religions, which place God at the center of the universe and position humans and nonhumans at the periphery, though in varying degrees of closeness to the center. Through this lens, although humans and other creatures are all part of God's creation, God granted humans the privilege to use, but not exploit, the natural world (Sayem 2019). This recognition of the inherent value of nature as endowed by God radically subverts anthropocentric instrumentalist modes of perceiving and interacting with the natural world, which attribute value to non-human life solely based on its use for humans. This belief holds significant implications for the ecological equilibrium of the planet. It "shapes our understanding of our place in the universe, our interactions with other species, and our approach to using natural resources to achieve a more balanced and sustainable life" (Mufid et al. 2023).

Theocentrism, thus, provides a framework through which followers of monotheistic religions can recognize their responsibility as guardians of God's creation.

Despite their often detrimental effects on nonhuman ecologies, by framing nature as sacred in the sight of God, monotheistic theocentric religions hold vast potential for reshaping ethical and moral values. Although this potential has been misused and misappropriated throughout modern history, by showing that humans are not separate from nature but inextricably linked to it, religion can provide a cosmological foundation for the formation of an environmental ethic based on spiritual, rather than simply material, principles. Ultimately, while Christian doctrine in particular has historically been used to justify the exploitation of nature, especially in the context of colonial expansions, modern scientific and industrial revolutions, and more recently global capitalism, religious scripture in varying sects also holds immense promise for the establishment of a more just and harmonious relationship between humans and the natural world. The current ecological crisis, thus, "requires a profound rethinking of the relation of humans to the natural world" (Tucker 1997)—a process in which the world's religions have a crucial role to play. While scholars studying the intersection between religion and conservation have closely examined the potential of monotheistic religions like Christianity and Islam, other religions, like the Baha'i faith, have been generally neglected in this inquiry. In order to address this gap in knowledge and contribute new insights into the growing discourse surrounding religions' diverse contributions or impediments toward conservation, I propose that the solution to the current ecological crisis facing the world may lie in a progressive, spiritual approach set forth in the teachings of the Baha'i faith. The Baha'i faith has as its main precept the oneness of mankind and, due to its relatively recent appearance and at a time where the world has grown deeply interconnected, it has not been interpreted in a way that places people into categories such as

chosen or gentile, saved or damned or in need of salvation. The Divine plan for this time and age—understood as the unification of humanity and the entire planet—makes it contradictory to classify some as insiders and others as outsiders. This logic not only applies to humans but can be extended to nonhumans as well, which are framed, in the faith, not as "other" but as members of the same realm occupied by humans. The absence of insider and outsider categories, thus, historically prevented colonialism and capitalism from justifying the exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of some to the detriment of others. Furthermore, the Baha'i perspective of human oneness made it far more difficult for these secular forces to redirect the regenerative and unifying essence embodied in religious beliefs toward their own ends of exploitation and domination.

The Baha'i faith supports White's criticism of Western instrumentalism, framing it within a discussion of rampant materialism and the barriers it poses to the advancement of world civilization. According to the teachings of the faith, the current ecological crisis is a product of a materialistic society that disregards the inherent sacredness of the natural world and the fundamental oneness of all creation. The Bahá'í view of nature goes far beyond its instrumental value to recognize its inherent worth in the sight of God, for nature "has spiritual significance, with the qualities of the divine being reflected in it" (Adriance and Dahl 2017). The Baha'i scriptures are filled with exhortations for the respectful treatment of nature, moderation in its use, and prohibitions on waste. A century ago, Bahá'u'lláh warned the world about the hazards posed by material civilization on the planet, saying that, "if carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it has been of good when kept within the restraints of moderation" (Bahá'u'lláh 1952, 342).

Like White, the Baha'i faith envisions the remedy for rampant materialism to lie in a total revision of notions of progress. It teaches that "if humanity's relationship with the natural world is to be refashioned, notions of progress, civilization, and development will need to be redefined" (Bahá'í International Community, "One Planet, One Habitation", 17). So long as value is ascribed solely on the basis of human use—giving way to relations of "excess, exploitation, and depletion" (Bahá'í International Community, "One Planet, One Habitation", 18)—a sustainable world is merely a fantasy. Any viable future world civilization must, therefore, seek moderation between the demands of material development and the requirements of the natural world. It is only once "the expectation of infinite growth on a finite planet" (Bahá'í International Community, "One Planet, One Habitation", 18) is abandoned that lasting solutions can be implemented. In the sections that follow, I examine spiritual motivators for environmental protection in the scriptural traditions of the Baha'i faith and their implications for conservation.

Spiritual Motivators for Conservation in the Scriptural Traditions of The Baha'i Faith I. The Harmony of Science and Religion

At the core of the Baha'i conservation ethic lies the belief in the harmony between science and religion. Science, in Baha'i theology, is envisioned far differently than it is in the West, where it has become entangled in systems of capitalism. Within this capitalist framework, scientific and technological advancements have transformed natural resources into commodities extracted for economic gain. In contrast, the Baha'i faith teaches that religion without science deteriorates into mere fanaticism and superstition, while science without religion becomes reduced to primitive materialism. The knowledge of science, in the faith, is unique to humans, whose intellect surpasses that of all other beings. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, science is the "most noble" of all human virtues and "the discoverer of all things" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 20). He

writes that “science is the first emanation from God toward man” and that, while all of creation embodies the potential for material perfection, “the power of intellectual investigation and scientific acquisition is a higher virtue specialized to man alone. Other beings and organisms are deprived of this potentiality and attainment” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, 20). He further elaborates:

> The outcome of this intellectual endowment is science which is especially characteristic of man. This scientific power investigates and apprehends created objects and the laws surrounding them. It is the discoverer of the hidden and mysterious secrets of the material universe and is peculiar to man alone. The most noble and praiseworthy accomplishment of man therefore is scientific knowledge and attainment… Science is the governor of nature and its mysteries, the one agency by which man explores the institutions of material creation. All created things are captives of nature and subject to its laws. They cannot transgress the control of these laws in one detail or particular. The infinite starry worlds and heavenly bodies are nature’s obedient subjects. The earth and its myriad organisms, all minerals, plants and animals are thralls of its dominion. But man through the exercise of his scientific, intellectual power can rise out of this condition, can modify, change and control nature according to his own wishes and uses. Science, so to speak, is the “breaker” of the laws of nature. In brief, man through the possession of this ideal endowment of scientific investigation is the most noble product of creation, the governor of nature. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, 30)

> All created things except man are captives of nature. The stars and suns swinging through infinite space, all earthly forms of life and existence whether mineral, vegetable or animal come under the dominion and control of natural law. Man through scientific knowledge and power rules nature and utilizes her laws to do his bidding. According to natural limitations he is a creature of earth restricted to life upon its surface, but through scientific utilization of material laws he soars in the sky, sails upon the ocean and dives beneath it. (Abdu'l-Baha 1945, 61)

Here, it can be seen that science, as a product of the human intellect, separates humans from the rest of creation. It allows humans to comprehend “the hidden and mysterious secrets of the material universe” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, 30) in ways that other beings cannot and to, in turn, free themselves from its exigencies. While the rest of creation remains “captive of nature and subject to its law” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, 30), humans are able to comprehend the laws and systems that govern the physical reality and rise above them, refashioning the world for their own ends. In this way, science becomes the “breaker of the laws of nature” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, 30) and man

becomes ruler over it. Human mastery over nature is, thus, hinged on the capacity to harness science.

Framing science and religion as complementary knowledge systems, the faith teaches that the response to the current ecological crisis must be equally based on spiritual principles as scientific knowledge (Adriance and Dahl 2017). Science, built as it is on the subject-object and rational-irrational duality generally advanced by monotheistic religions, has the tendency to reduce the value of nature to purely instrumental terms in the name of human advancement. A commitment to the progress and well-being of human society as a whole necessitates that the production and application of science be guided by moral principles that give clarity to its impact on the resources on which human life depends. Science alone is, therefore, inadequate for remedying the imbalances and inequalities that plague society. It must be complemented by or integrated within another set of principles or systems of knowledge in order to overcome its own destructive potential. From the Baha'i perspective, the remedy to the deterioration of the natural world caused by unrestrained materialism lies in the union between science and a religion built on the consciousness of human oneness and committed to the advancement of a more just and united world. Thus, unlike its modern conception, science is not a self-sufficient system of knowledge and must be guided by the moral and spiritual principles set forth by religion. The purpose of science, just like that of religion, is to contribute toward the prosperity of all humankind, but this can only occur if it walks hand in hand with religion. While science provides the technical and intellectual basis on which to approach conservation, religion provides spiritual motivations for conservation by making humans morally obligated to those beyond just themselves. Taken together, science and religion avoid the tendency to reduce human progress to pure consumption and reinforce the universal moral imperative that humans preserve nature not

only for its own sake but for their own well-being. The shift towards a more sustainable and inclusive world, thus, requires particular attention to a "harmonious dynamic between the material and non-material (or moral) dimensions of consumption and production" (Adriance and Dahl 2017). Ultimately, according to the Baha'i faith, a sustainable future is also a globally just future, which is only within reach if science is joined with spiritual principles. This future world civilization is animated by a deep religious faith in which scientific developments allow humanity to live in harmony with nature (Bahá'í International Community, "Conservation and sustainable development in the Baha'i faith"). Recognizing harmony between science and religion as the foundation on which to build a more ecological future, I position the preceding discussion of Baha'i principles related to conservation within this very framework. In the remainder of this paper, I examine scriptures addressing the connection between God and nature, the diversity of creation, relations of interconnectedness and interdependence between humans and nature, material and spiritual distinctions between humans and nature, and the necessity of treating animals with kindness.

II. Nature as a Reflection of the Divine Attributes of God

A Baha'i-inspired conservation ethic must have at its core the principle that nature is sacred, meaning that it possesses a spiritual quality endowed by God. This belief is rooted in the understanding that all of creation is intimately tethered to the divine and, therefore, reflect the qualities and attributes of God. Thus, since the sacredness of God is manifested in all of creation, the sacredness of creation equates to His. Baha'u'llah writes: "Nature is God's Will and is its expression in and through the contingent world" (Bahá'u'lláh 1978, 142). This concept is further elaborated in the following prayer:

> (W)hatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine Omnipotence. (Bahá'u'lláh 1987*,* 272*)*

In every corner of the earth—from the mountains to the sea—evidence of God's mercy can be discerned. These "signs" and "tokens" (Bahá'u'lláh 1987, 272*)* are embodied in every being of all degrees of complexity—even at the atomic level. Through this lens, even objects that may be deemed inanimate—like a stone—reflect the glory of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá examines this topic in depth, saying that only when the "innermost essence" and "individuality" of all things are contemplated, can one begin to behold "the rays of [God's] Names and Attributes throughout all the realm of being" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 41-42). He writes: "Look thou upon the trees, upon the blossoms and fruits, even upon the stones. Here too wilt thou behold the Sun's rays shed upon them, clearly visible within them, and manifested by them" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 41-42). The Sun, here, again represents God showering His splendors as rays upon the earth. Perceiving the grandeur and bounty of the natural world as embodiments of the majesty of God, ultimately, transforms nature into one medium through which God's hidden mysteries become known, rendering nature itself sacred in the process.

The Baha'i belief that all life embodies the divine attributes of God is situated within a broader discourse in monotheistic religions that recognizes the fundamental linkage between the Creator and His creation (The Bahá'í Faith, "Baha'i Statement on Nature"). Furthermore, the Baha'i faith teaches that, despite being a repository of the diverse attributes of God, nature is

neither to be worshipped nor held in high esteem for its own sake. This is because, while all of creation reflects qualities of God, these qualities are not equally distributed. Baha'u'llah writes:

> 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. (Baha'u'llah 1952, 65)

> 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… To a supreme degree is this true of man, who, among all created things… hath been singled out for the glory of such distinction. For in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God to a degree that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed. (Baha'u'llah 1952, 178)

These passages show that, while nature is endowed with only some of God's divine qualities, humans possess all His "names and attributes" (Baha'u'llah 1952, 65), attaining a degree of proximity to God "that no other created being hath excelled or surpassed" (Baha'u'llah 1952, 178). In this sense, the Baha'i faith is not ecocentric but theocentric, advancing the belief that, while God lies always at the center, humans possess a unique place in the universe which differentiates them from nonhumans. This distinction, as hypothesized by White, may serve to justify human dominion over the natural world. However, while the belief that humans most closely mirror their Creator seems to open the way for the instrumentalist notion that nature's sole purpose is to be used by humans for their own gain, the Baha'i take on this principle differs fundamentally from Western instrumentalism. The utility of nature in the context of the Baha'i faith rests on its association with the spiritual rather than the exclusively material realm. This means that nature is valuable not because humans give it value but because God deems it so. Nature, moreover, is not only a means for understanding the Creator but also to assist humanity in its divinely-ordained duty of carrying forward an ever-advancing world civilization founded on the principles of universal peace and the unity of humanity.

Ultimately, at the heart of a Baha'i conservation ethic lies the belief that nature is a reflection of the divine qualities and attributes of God and is to be used as an instrument for spiritual progress. The faith teaches humans to use it not from a place of selfish greed and unhindered desire, but from a place of lofty, spiritual ambition in service to the well-being of humanity. This worldview renders nature sacred and worthy of preservation, as it transforms caring for nature into a form of service and spiritual fulfillment in itself.

III. Diversity in Nature

The Baha'i faith teaches that evidence of the bond between God and nature can be seen in the diverse conditions in which life flourishes and the forms in which it expresses itself (Landau 2002). Having examined the implications of the principle that nature is an embodiment of the divine attributes of God for a Baha'i-inspired conservation ethic, I now analyze the significance of the diverse ways in which these attributes are manifested.

'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that "the forms and organisms of phenomenal being and existence in each of the kingdoms of the universe are myriad and numberless" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 285). Like humans—two of whom are never the same, no matter how similar they may appear—repetition does not exist in nature. The vegetable and animal kingdoms are infinite in form and composition and emerge under vastly different conditions. Beyond the physical sphere, every distinct being has its own unique identity and individual purpose. The diversity of nature, however, does not pose a barrier to the unity of creation in the Baha'i faith but, rather, reflects a single divine origin. On the topic of unity in diversity in the context of nature, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

> Consider the world of created beings, how varied and diverse they are in species, yet with one sole origin. All the differences that appear are those of outward form and colour. This diversity of type is apparent throughout the whole of nature. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1951, 51)

Diversity is, therefore, an outward physical reality that reflects the inner spiritual reality of the oneness of God. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá often uses the metaphor of a garden to illustrate this, saying that, “though differing in kind, color, form and shape,” the flowers of the garden are “refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun” (Abdu’l-Baha 1978, 291). The flowers, here, represent the various beings that populate the earth and the wind and the sun, as before, represent the essence of God.

The Baha’i faith also teaches that diversity in nature is a manifestation of beauty and evidence of its perfection. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá again harkens to the analogy of the garden, beckoning humanity to witness “the beauty in diversity, the beauty of harmony” which makes it so that “each flower, each tree, each fruit, besides being beautiful in itself, brings out by contrast the qualities of the others, and shows to advantage the special loveliness of each and all” ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1951, 51).

> Diversity is the essence of perfection… This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole… How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and color! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. (Abdu’l-Baha 1978, 291)

In this passage, a garden is likened to a human body. Like the physical body, which depends on limbs and organs of various forms and functions to be complete and to successfully survive, the garden requires diversity to be whole and to prosper. Without variation in colors and forms, the garden becomes dull. It is in contrast that the garden finds completeness. By teaching the

centrality of diversity "to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole" (Abdu'l-Baha 1978, 291), the Baha'i writings motivate humans to preserve the earth's vast biodiversity as if it were vital for the well-being of their own bodies. The unity and beauty that emerges from the diversity of nature that surrounds them, therefore, further compels them to form bonds of solidarity with the natural world. Ultimately, the Baha'i scriptures frame nature's inherent sacredness as a function of its divine origins, which are reflected in its diverse manifestations. Appreciating this diversity is, therefore, a fundamental step in recognizing the inherent value of nature.

IV. The Interconnectedness of All Life

The innate diversity of creation serves as the foundation for another central tenet of the Baha'i faith, the interconnectedness of all forms of life, which also guides the Baha'i vision for the future of civilization. Over a century ago, Bahá'u'lláh declared that "the well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established" (Bahá'u'lláh 1952, 286). This unity is not exclusive to humans, however, and extends to the natural world as well. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, despite its inherent diversity, "every part of the universe is connected with every other part by ties that are very powerful and admit of no imbalance, nor any slackening whatever" (Abdu'l-Baha 1978, 157). Interconnectedness is, therefore, a force that governs all of creation.

This interconnectedness originated at creation and was set into motion by the laws of attraction. Like all the other attributes of God, it is present at every level of existence—even the atomic. 'Abdu'l-Bahá discusses the origin of life, writing that the "terrestrial globe came to exist, grow and develop" within the universe by "assuming different forms and conditions until it gradually attained its present completeness, became adorned with countless beings, and appeared in such a consummate form" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 210). He elaborates, saying:

> ...originally matter was one, and that one matter appeared in a different form in each element. Thus, various forms appeared, and as they appeared, they each assumed an independent form and became a specific element… Then these elements were composed, arranged and combined in infinite forms... From the composition of the elements; from their combination, manner and proportion; and from their interaction with other beings countless forms and realities and innumerable beings have come to exist. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 208-209)

> All these endless beings which inhabit the world, whether man, animal, vegetable, mineral - whatever they may be - are surely, each one of them, composed of elements. There is no doubt that this perfection which is in all beings is caused by the creation of God from the composing elements, by their appropriate mingling and proportionate quantities, the mode of their composition, and the influence of other beings. For all beings are connected together like a chain, and reciprocal help, assistance, and influence belonging to the properties of things, are the causes of the existence, development and growth of created beings. (Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 207)

As mentioned previously, all matter in the universe originated from a single unified source which manifested itself in diverse forms as the vast array of living creatures that populate the earth came into being. The human body is also used as a metaphor to illustrate this oneness between humanity and nature. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes in a tablet to an individual believer that the “temple of the world” has been fashioned from “the likeness of the human body” (Abdu’l-Bahá 1987, 23). Like the human body, which is “outwardly composed of different limbs and organs” but is inwardly “a closely integrated, coherent entity,” the physical world resembles “a single being whose limbs and members are inseparably linked together” (Abdu’l-Bahá 1987, 23). By regarding the earth as a human body, it becomes evident that all things are interconnected and exert influence on each other. Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

> This limitless universe is like the human body, all the members of which are connected and linked with one another… In the same way, the parts of this infinite universe have their members and elements connected with one another, and influence one another spiritually and materially. ('Abdu'l-Baha 2014, 245-246)

Another consequence of this interconnectedness is that, in acknowledging that the earth mirrors the human body in the structure of its systems and their functions, humans realize that harming

one seemingly-isolated aspect of nature harms the whole, just as pain to one part of the body affects its entirety. Bahá'u'lláh, on this topic, writes: “Regard ye the world as a man's body, which is afflicted with diverse ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonizing of all its component elements” (Bahá'u'lláh 2002, 79-80). In comparing the world to a human body, Baha’i scriptures emphasize the necessity to care for all aspects of it.

Furthermore, like the component parts of the human body, which are constantly exerting influence on each other, humans simultaneously shape their environment and are shaped by it. The Baha’i faith teaches that the interconnectedness of all life inevitably leads to interdependence. The writings emphasize “how dependent any one life-form is on numerous others—and how imbalances in one system reverberate across an interconnected whole” (Bahá'í International Community, “One Planet, One Habitation”, 1). This is a law that governs all of creation. In the following section, I examine how the Baha’i belief in interconnectedness lays the foundation for the principle of interdependence, which reframes the human-nature relationship as one that must be based on notions of reciprocity and cooperation.

V. Reciprocity and Cooperation in Human-Nature Relationships

The recognition that humans are not separate from, but one with nature and are, therefore, mutually enmeshed in transformative processes, compels them to engage in relations based on harmony and equilibrium with the natural world. In a letter written to an individual believer in 1933, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), a direct descendant of Bahá'u'lláh and the Guardian of the Bahá'í faith, tasked with translating and expounding many of the writings of the faith and disseminating its teachings globally, explained:

> We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life moulds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions. (Shoghi Effendi 1933)

Here, humanity is urged to recognize its interdependence with all of creation—an awareness which, in turn, motivates it to enter into relations of reciprocity with the natural world. The belief in the interdependence of all life underlies the "Baha'i understanding of both the operations of the universe and the responsibilities of humankind" (Palmer and Finlay 2003, 73). Abdu'l-Bahá writes that all created things are comprised of elements and that their completeness is a function of these "component elements, their appropriate combination, their proportionate measure, the manner of their composition, and the influence of other created things" (Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 205). The single origin of matter, which links together all life, makes it so that "mutual aid, assistance, and interaction are among their intrinsic properties and are the cause of their formation, development, and growth" (Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 205).

> The greatest relationship that bindeth the world of being together lieth in the range of created things themselves, and that co-operation, mutual aid and reciprocity are essential characteristics in the unified body of the world of being, inasmuch as all created things are closely related together and each is influenced by the other or deriveth benefit therefrom, either directly or indirectly. Consider for instance how one group of created things constituteth the vegetable kingdom, and another the animal kingdom. Each of these two maketh use of certain elements in the air on which its own life dependeth, while each increaseth the quantity of such elements as are essential for the life of the other. In other words, the growth and development of the vegetable world is impossible without the existence of the animal kingdom, and the maintenance of animal life is inconceivable without the co-operation of the vegetable kingdom. Of like kind are the relationships that exist among all created things. Hence it was stated that co-operation and reciprocity are essential properties which are inherent in the unified system of the world of existence, and without which the entire creation would be reduced to nothingness. (Abdu'l-Bahá 1989, 71)

Here, it becomes evident that “co-operation, mutual aid, and reciprocity” are fundamental to maintaining “the unified body of the world of being” (Abdu’l-Bahá 1989, 71). The progress of any species is, therefore, impossible without input from a range of others.

Furthermore, according to the faith, all of creation—from the heavens to the earth—originates from God and is, thus, deserving of respectful and responsible treatment. Bahá'u'lláh warns against failing to recognize the essence of God in all things, writing:

> What is it of which ye can rightly boast? Is it on your food and your drink that ye pride yourselves, on the riches ye lay up in your treasuries, on the diversity and the cost of the ornaments with which ye deck yourselves? If true glory were to consist in the possession of such perishable things, then the earth on which ye walk must needs vaunt itself over you, because it supplieth you, and bestoweth upon you, these very things, by the decree of the Almighty. In its bowels are contained, according to what God hath ordained, all that ye possess. From it, as a sign of His mercy, ye derive your riches. Behold then your state, the thing in which ye glory! Would that ye could perceive it! (Bahá'u'lláh 1952, 252-253)

Thus, recognizing and partaking in the bounties of nature requires an attitude of profound humility. Viewing the earth as the source of their prosperity, humans cannot take pride in the accumulation of material goods while glorifying themselves over the rest of creation. Bahá'u'lláh writes that man must be made aware that “the source of his prosperity, his wealth, his might, his exaltation, his advancement and power” is the earth and that “whoever is cognizant of this truth, is cleansed and sanctified from all pride, arrogance, and vainglory” (Bahá'u'lláh 1979, 44). He urges humanity to “take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forego that which exceedeth them” (Bahá'u'lláh 2002, 194). Only by exercising equity and care in their judgements can humans live within the bounds of justice and exist in peaceful harmony with nature. In a slightly more admonishing tone, Bahá’u’lláh writes: “Ye walk on My earth complacent and self-satisfied, heedless that My earth is weary of you and everything within it shunneth you” (Bahá’u’lláh 1991, 28-29). The consequences of human greed and corruption are

disastrous and already evidenced in the current state of the environment. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, discussing the perfection of nature, asks: “Shall man, infinitely above them in degree, be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection?” ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 350). In this way, 'Abdu'l-Bahá seeks to avoid the pit-falls identified by White in Christian theology, which allowed for the justification of human domination over the nonhuman world.

Ultimately, the Baha’i faith teaches that all things are interdependent and flourish according to the law of reciprocity, which must be undertaken with a posture of humility and moderation in order to preserve natural resources for future generations. Only through relations of cooperation and reciprocity can humans ensure the planetary balance necessary for sustaining "the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole” (Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 291). The faith maintains, however, that the role of humans and nonhumans within relations of reciprocity are not identical in the sight of God. While it views nature as a reflection of the sacred and teaches that nature must be highly valued and respected, nature is not meant to be worshipped or adored. Rather, its purpose is to serve humanity in carrying forward an ever-advancing civilization. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that, to man, God has given “such wonderful power that he can guide, control and overcome nature” ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1951, 122). He gives the example of cultivation as a practice of reciprocity in which humans manipulate nature for their own ends. He writes:

> If the earth is not cultivated, it becomes a jungle where useless weeds grow; but if a cultivator comes and tills the ground, it produces crops which nourish living creatures… Consider the trees: if they remain without a cultivator, they will be fruitless, and without fruit they are useless; but if they receive the care of a gardener, these same barren trees become fruitful, and through cultivation, fertilization and engrafting the trees which had bitter fruits yield sweet fruits. (Abdu’l-Bahá 2014, 7)
>
> If we should relegate this plot of ground to its natural state, allow it to return to its original condition, it would become a field of thorns and useless weeds, but by cultivation it will become fertile soil, yielding a harvest. Deprived of cultivation, the mountain slopes would be jungles and forests without fruitful trees. The gardens bring forth fruits and

> flowers in proportion to the care and tillage bestowed upon them by the gardener. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982*,* 353)

The earth, therefore, requires cultivation. For, “a grain of wheat, when cultivated by the farmer, will yield a whole harvest, and a seed, through the gardener’s care, will grow into a great tree*”* (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1978, 132). Furthermore, the unity and symmetry inherent to gardens and fields result from “the care of a skillful gardener” or farmer while the absence of such results in “a state of disorder and irregularity” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1978, 290). It is also seen here that the productivity of a garden or field is proportional “to the care and tillage bestowed upon them by the gardener (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982*,* 353).

Human intervention in the form of cultivation, which enhances the fertility and productivity of the earth, provides nature with the conditions in which to fulfill its true purpose and to reflect the “beauty and symmetry” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1982, 308) latent in it. The same is true in respect to animals which, when domesticated, can be used by humans towards the progress of their civilizations. The natural world, from this perspective, requires human intervention to achieve its full potential. The imbalance in these relations of reciprocity, essentially, lies in the fact that the purpose of nature is to be used by humans, while humanity has a higher purpose beyond mere cultivation or domestication in the sight of God. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

> The height of exaltation and the perfection of the vegetable world is that… a gardener should attend to its cultivation, and that day by day it should develop and yield fruit. But its real prosperity is to progress into the animal and human world, and replace that which has been exhausted in the bodies of animals and men. The exaltation of the animal world is to possess perfect members, organs and powers, and to have all its needs supplied. This is its chief glory, its honour and exaltation. So the supreme happiness of an animal is to have possession of a green and fertile meadow, perfectly pure flowing water, and a lovely, verdant forest. If these things are provided for it, no greater prosperity can be imagined… but real prosperity for the animal consists in passing from the animal world to the human world… This is the great honour and prosperity for the animal world; no greater honour can be conceived for it. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 78-79)

By emphasizing the interdependence of humans and nature—specifically, the notion that human intervention allows nature to fulfill its true potential—the Baha'i faith enjoins humanity to practice stewardship as an expression of care towards the earth. As a theocentric religion, the faith teaches that, although neither nature nor humanity are at the center of the universe, it is God's will that humanity acts as a caring steward of the earth (Landau 2002). As "trustees of the planet's vast resources and biological diversity," humanity must protect the heritage of future generation by recognizing nature—the source of all material bounties—as a reflection of the divine, treat the earth with humility, temper its activities with moderation, and, in all its actions and decisions, be "guided by the fundamental spiritual truth of our age, the oneness of humanity" (Baha'i International Community, "Conservation and sustainable development in the Baha'i faith"). This attitude of care and stewardship necessitates a complete transformation in the dominant instrumentalist worldview that persists in the West. The Baha'i teachings affirm that nature must not be exploited for self-interest but, rather, harnessed sustainably and with care in order to advance "humanity's collective development—both material and spiritual" (International Environment Forum, "Baha'i Faith and Biodiversity"). Establishing a sustainable relationship with nature requires, therefore, not only a new conception of nature and humanity's relationship to it but also a new understanding of individual and collective life that transcends instrumentalist and individualistic frameworks of thought. It requires, moreover, a commitment to applying principles of reciprocity to every sphere of human endeavor.

The Baha'i notion of human-nonhuman relationship is especially reminiscent of traditional indigenous ways of conceptualizing and interacting with the earth, which have been shaped by the recognition of mutual dependence and reciprocity with the natural world for centuries. According to this worldview—informed by animism—humans and nonhumans are not isolated

to their own realms of existence but are active agents with mutual responsibilities towards one another. All life is believed to be "bound up in moral relationships of reciprocal responsibilities" (Whyte 2018, 155). Within these relations of reciprocity, humans "make personal and spiritual sacrifices to maintain harmony and balance in the natural world" (Aftandilian 2011, 232). They conduct prayers, rituals, and ceremonies that serve to spiritually renew the world and "ensure the changing cycles of the seasons, the fertility of plants and animals, and the continuing vitality of the whole created order" (Aftandilian 2011, 232). In return, plants and animals give their lives to humans so that they may survive and prosper. Many indigenous cultures, therefore, view their dependence on the natural world for survival as evidence that humans are inextricably linked to it through bonds of reciprocity. Like in the Baha'i faith, the responsibility of humankind is to serve nature, not dominate it—a belief which drastically opposes the dominant Western worldview that nature is passive and inferior to humans and must, as a result of this condition, be exploited for human gain. The Baha'i faith, thus, closely mirrors indigenous animistic traditions in fundamental ways.

VI. The Distinction Between Humans and Nature

Despite teaching the unity of all creation, the Baha'i faith maintains a clear distinction between humans and nature. As mentioned previously, the faith expounds that, while nature is sacred in its own right and must, thus, be valued and cared for, it must not be worshipped. Rather, its purpose is to serve humanity in carrying forth an ever-advancing civilization. Although they must be treated equally in regard to their shared animal condition, the treatment of humans, meanwhile, entails the recognition of a rational soul which imposes different requirements. In this section, I examine the spiritual and material foundations on which this distinction rests—specifically in terms of intellect and the quality of the soul—and how it

justifies human dominion over nature while maintaining the sacredness of nature, profoundly re-shaping the human-nature relationship.

The Baha'i faith advances the theocentric vision that the universe is classified into seperate spheres of varying stations. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that beings evolve towards higher degrees of perfection: "the mineral passes with its mineral perfections to the vegetable; the vegetable, with its perfections, passes to the animal world, and so on to that of humanity" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1951, 66). The mineral kingdom refers to matter or substance that moves between different forms of composition while the vegetable kingdom represents a higher degree of complexity and specialization from the mineral kingdom due to its ability to grow and change. Furthermore, the animal kingdom possesses the capacity for consciousness and perception of the environment around it. And lastly, the human kingdom—the highest form of material complexity—is endowed with a more developed intellect that allows for the apprehension of spiritual realities ('Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'llah 1956, 242). Humans, given the "ideal and heavenly force latent and manifest in [them]," occupy a station that is "higher and nobler" than nature and are, therefore, "[rulers] over nature's sphere and province" (Abdu'l-Bahá 1982, 178). 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: "to man God has given such wonderful power that he can guide, control and overcome nature... What ignorance and stupidity it is to worship and adore nature, when God in His goodness has made us masters thereof" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1951, 127). These differences in stations—much like differences in forms and compositions—are necessary for the "the order and perfection of the universe" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 199) and have persisted since creation, when humans were conceived in the likeness of God. Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

> Despite that perfection of the animal's station, the human station—with its ability to perceive and explore the unknown and discover the truth of things unseen—allows us to transcend the world of nature with reflection, with intellect and with soulful understanding… [the animal] is incapable, in turn, of conscious ideation or reflection

> which characterizes and differentiates the human kingdom. The animal neither exercises nor apprehends this distinctive human power and gift. From the visible it cannot draw conclusions regarding the invisible, whereas the human mind from visible and known premises attains knowledge of the unknown and invisible… Such power of accomplishment is beyond the range of animal intelligence. Therefore, this power is a distinctive attribute of the human spirit and kingdom. The animal spirit cannot penetrate and discover the mysteries of things. (Abdu'l-Baha 1982, 58)

Humans are differentiated from nature by their unique capacity for intellect which frees them from the confines of material reality and allows them to comprehend the divine mysteries of God. Thus, while nonhumans are unable to discern things beyond their immediate material conditions, humans are capable of conscious reflection which allows them to "transcend the world of nature" and comprehend "the unknown and invisible" (Abdu'l-Baha 1982, 58). 'Abdu'l-Bahá further elaborates:

> Man is endowed with volition and memory; nature has neither. Man can seek out the mysteries latent in nature whereas nature is not conscious of her own hidden phenomena. Man is progressive; nature is stationary, without the power of progression or retrogression. Man is endowed with ideal virtues, for example intellection, volition, — among them faith, confession and acknowledgment of God, while nature is devoid of all these. The ideal faculties of man, including the capacity of scientific acquisition are beyond nature's ken. These are powers whereby man is differentiated and distinguished from all other forms of life… God has endowed man with virtues, powers and ideal faculties of which nature is entirely bereft and by which man is elevated, distinguished and superior. (Abdu'l-Baha 1945, 61)

> Man is ruler over nature's sphere and province. Nature is inert; man is progressive. Nature has no consciousness; man is endowed with it. Nature is without volition and acts perforce, whereas man possesses a mighty will. Nature is incapable of discovering mysteries or realities, whereas man is especially fitted to do so. Nature is not in touch with the realm of God; man is attuned to its evidences. Nature is uninformed of God; man is conscious of Him. Man acquires divine virtues; nature is denied them. Man can voluntarily discontinue vices; nature has no power to modify the influence of its instincts. Altogether it is evident that man is more noble and superior, that in him there is an ideal power surpassing nature. He has consciousness, volition, memory, intelligent power, divine attributes and virtues of which nature is completely deprived and bereft; therefore, man is higher and nobler by reason of the ideal and heavenly force latent and manifest in him. ('Abdu'l-Bahá and Bahá'u'lláh 1956, 236-237)

While humans are capable of transcending the limits of nature, nonhumans—possessing neither intellect nor advanced perception—are captives to it. Abdu'l-Baha writes that the animal, devoid of "spiritual susceptibilities, ignorant of divine religion and without knowledge of the kingdom of God" and, furthermore, lacking the capacity for "ideation or conscious intelligence," is "a captive of the senses and deprived of that which lies beyond [it]" (Abdu'l-Baha and Bahá'u'lláh 1956, 235). Unlike humans, it cannot perceive beyond its physical senses. This means that nature, due to the limits of its consciousness and reason, is governed by laws from which humans are liberated. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "the phenomenal world is entirely subject to the rule and control of natural law" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982*,* 17). He contrasts nature's "absolute organization" and its lack of "intelligence" and "will" with man's ability to "[command] the forces of Nature" through intellect (Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 3). He writes that God has conferred upon humans the unique "faculty of intellectual investigation into the secrets of creation, the acquisition of higher knowledge, the greatest virtue of which is scientific enlightenment" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1982*,* 30). The Baha'i writings, therefore, depict humans as active agents and nonhumans as inert and passive in the sight of God, granting humans a degree of dominion over nature. Furthermore, the laws and arrangements which govern nature are a direct manifestation of the will of God, "the Ruler of the world of Nature" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 2014, 3).

Apart from differences in intellect, humans and animals differ in their spiritual capacities as well. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that, while the human body, like the animal's, is subject to the laws of nature and while "man is endowed with a second reality, the rational or intellectual reality" which "predominates over nature" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1945, 51), humans possess a third reality as well. This is a spiritual reality which allows humans to grasp things beyond the material world. By transcending the limits of the material world, humans are able to comprehend the mysteries

of God. Humans are, therefore, distinguished from animals by their spiritual endowments—specifically, the possession of an immortal soul, which allows them to transcend the physical realm after death and reunite with their Creator. Abdu'l-Baha writes that humans are not simply physical bodies but souls: "though physically man belongs to the animal kingdom… his soul lifts him above the rest of creation… The soul it is which makes the human creature a celestial entity" (Abdu'l-Baha 1951, 86). Animals, meanwhile, are endowed with an animal spirit which, unlike the immortal human soul, does not persist nor ascend to a higher realm of existence after the death of the physical body, but disappears completely. In the Baha'i writings, this "spirit" refers to the unique "potentialities that pervade the various kingdoms of existence" (Kamelia 2016).

Ultimately, alongside the belief that "only human beings have the capacity for the intelligence, the insight and the spirituality necessary to forge a relationship with the Creator," the Baha'i faith teaches that "the soul belongs exclusively to human beings" (Langness 2015). The belief that humans possess inner faculties such as intellect and a rational soul that are absent from the rest of creation enables them to gain mastery over nature, to comprehend the existence of God, and to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization. This does not mean that humans are not part of nature, but that their capacity to know God and His mysteries renders them at the same time superior to and responsible for how they treat the rest of creation. The distinction between man and nature, thus, lies in the discrepancy between their potentialities.

VII. The Proper Treatment of Animals

Despite the various ways in which humans differ from animals and the disparity in station that arises from these differences, the Baha'i faith teaches that this does not justify the cruel or

even indifferent treatment of the natural world. From a Baha'i perspective, animals—as an integral part of God's creation and, therefore, sacred in their own right—must be treated with extreme kindness. The Baha'i scriptures frame kindness to animals as a divine responsibility to care for God's creation. Bahá'u'lláh calls for man to "show kindness to animals" (Bahá'u'lláh 1952, 265) and to "look not upon the creatures of God except with the eye of kindliness and of mercy" (Bahá'u'lláh 1952*,* 15). Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

> 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… The feelings are one and the same, whether ye inflict pain on man or on beast… Train your children from their earliest days to be infinitely tender and loving to animals. If an animal be sick, let the children try to heal it, if it be hungry, let them feed it, if thirsty, let them quench its thirst, if weary, let them see that it rests. ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 138)

Here, the writings call on humanity to treat animals with care on the basis of the shared experience of pain. Furthermore, 'Abdu'l-Bahá even goes so far as to say that animals, given their inability to communicate through language to express their pain, must be treated with even more consideration that humans: "Therefore is it essential… that ye be even kinder to him than to your fellow man" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 138).

Animals are also depicted, in the writings, as pure and vulnerable in ways that humans are not, further necessitating care and protection. According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, while "most human beings are sinners," animals are innocent and, therefore, most worthy and deserving of "kindness and love" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 138). Like Bahá'u'lláh, he warns against ignoring this reality, saying: "Tenderness and loving-kindness are basic principles of God's heavenly Kingdom. Ye should most carefully bear this matter in mind" ('Abdu'l-Bahá 1978, 138).

The Bahá'í prohibition of cruelty to animals is also reflected in demands for moderation in the use of natural resources. While hunting and the consumption of meat are not forbidden in the

faith, the teachings warn against hunting beyond bare necessity. Bahá'u'lláh implores humanity to tread “the path of justice and equity in all things” (Bahá'u'lláh 1992, 40) and to take heed to not hunt to excess. While the practical implications of this ethic have not yet been adjudicated in the Baha’i writings or by any Baha’i institution, the sentiment is evidently one of care and compassion. These elements of the faith closely mirror many indigenous North American subsistence traditions, which are deeply rooted in animism. Perceiving animals as bearers of spirits and, thus, recognizing their personhood, many indigenous traditions insist that animals are treated respectfully and hunted sustainably (Aftandilian 2011, Whyte 2018). Because of their commitments to these beliefs, they prohibit the waste and over-exploitation of natural resources. However, while the belief in animism, in this context, serves to stimulate feelings of care and respect, the Baha’i faith is able to stimulate similar feelings in the absence of animism by referencing other realities such as the oneness of creation and the divine origins of nature.

The Value of a Baha’i Conservation Ethic

In the era of the Anthropocene—a historical moment in which humans are altering the face of the earth more rapidly than ever before and on a geological scale—it is becoming evident that a transformation in the human relationship with nature is necessary for repairing and restoring the planetary systems that support all life. The teachings of the Baha’i faith, which have long warned against destroying the perfection of nature, provide one possible approach to addressing the current ecological crisis (Adriance and Dahl 2017).

Throughout the course of this paper, I have shown how the moral authority invoked by religious scripture provides the foundations for a conservation ethic based on care. The Baha’i faith resists the ideology of Western instrumentalism by emphasizing the fundamental sacredness

of all life on earth. It teaches that nature possesses a spirit which, unlike the animist view, does not tie it to a supernatural essence in the same way as the human soul but nevertheless imbues it with value. Because nature is a reflection of God's divine attributes and because of the inherent interconnectedness of all life, it is humanity's responsibility to preserve it for future generations.

Furthermore, the fact that, despite both being sacred, humanity and nature are not equal in the sight of God and that nature's purpose is to serve humanity in its task of carrying forth an ever-advancing civilization does not limit the Baha'i contribution to a conservation ethic but stimulates spiritual motives for the preservation of the earth. Unlike Western instrumentalism, in which humans attribute and determine the value of natural objects, the Baha'i faith teaches that the value of all life is bestowed by God. Thus, while nature must not be idolized or worshipped, it must be cared for, respected, and treated with kindness because it is part of God's perfect creation.

An absence of animism in the Baha'i faith, therefore, does not necessarily imply an absence of care. For, Baha'i writings addressing the environment are deeply ingrained in notions of interconnectedness, respect, and responsibility, which together give way to interactions based on stewardship and reciprocity. It is the Baha'i conviction, moreover, that a promising conservation ethic must be rooted in a universally shared vision for the future of humanity which, if not emerging from a place of care, is inadequate for addressing the current ecological crisis. The Baha'i faith, ultimately, calls for a new world order based on the recognition that all of creation is worthy of care and respect. Shoghi Effendi, in a letter to a believer, captured this exact sentiment: "We need a change of heart, a reframing of all our conceptions and a new

orientation of our activities. The inward life of man as well as his outward environment have to be reshaped if human salvation is to be secured" (Shoghi Effendi 1932).

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