

Compilation

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The Baha'i Concept of Evil

Selected extracts from the Baha'i writings and letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice, compiled by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice.

From the writings of Baha'u'llah

Indeed the actions of man himself breed a profusion of satanic power. For were men to abide by and observe the divine teachings, every trace of evil would be banished from the face of the earth. However, the widespread differences that exist among mankind and the prevalence of sedition, contention, conflict and the like are the primary factors which provoke the appearance of the satanic spirit. Yet the Holy Spirit hath ever shunned such matters. A world in which naught can be perceived save strife, quarrels and corruption is bound to become the seat of the throne, the very metropolis, of Satan.

(Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh Revealed after the Kitāb-i-Aqdas
(Haifa: Bahā'ī World Centre, 1982), pp. 176–7) [1]

From the writings and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Baha

As to the question of evil spirits, demons and monsters, any references made to them in the Holy Books have symbolic meaning. What is currently known among the public is but sheer superstition.

(From a Tablet to an individual believer – translated from the Persian) [2]

The tree of good and evil signifies the human world; for the spiritual and divine world is purely good and absolutely luminous, but in the human world light and darkness, good and evil, exist as opposite conditions.

(Some Answered Questions (Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1985), p. 123) [3]

Man is in the highest degree of materiality, and at the beginning of spirituality – that is to say, he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the last degree of darkness, and at the beginning of light; that is why it has been said that the condition of man is the end of the night and the beginning of day, meaning that he is the sum of all the degrees of imperfection, and that he possesses the degrees of perfection. He has the animal side as well as the angelic side, and the aim of an educator is to so train human souls that their angelic aspect may overcome their animal side. Then if the divine power in man, which is his essential perfection, overcomes

the satanic power, which is absolute imperfection, he becomes the most excellent among the creatures; but if the satanic power overcomes the divine power, he becomes the lowest of the creatures. That is why he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection ...

Man is said to be the greatest representative of God, and he is the Book of Creation because all the mysteries of beings exist in him. If he comes under the shadow of the True Educator and is rightly trained, he becomes the essence of essences, the light of lights, the spirit of spirits; he becomes the centre of the divine appearances, the source of spiritual qualities, the rising-place of heavenly lights, and the receptacle of divine inspirations. If he is deprived of this education, he becomes the manifestation of satanic qualities, the sum of animal vices, and the source of all dark conditions.

(*Some Answered Questions*, pp. 235–36) [4]

The reality underlying this question is that the evil spirit, Satan or whatever is interpreted as evil, refers to the lower nature in man. This baser nature is symbolized in various ways. In man there are two expressions: One is the expression of nature; the other, the expression of the spiritual realm. The world of nature is defective ... It is an essential condition of the soil of earth that thorns, weeds and fruitless trees may grow from it. Relatively speaking, this is evil; it is simply the lower state and baser product of nature. It is evident, therefore, that man is in need of divine education and inspiration, that the spirit and bounties of God are essential to his development. That is to say, the teachings of Christ and the Prophets are necessary for his education and guidance. Why? Because They are the divine Gardeners Who till the earth of human hearts and minds. They educate man, uproot the weeds, burn the thorns and remodel the waste places into gardens and orchards where fruitful trees grow. The wisdom and purpose of Their training is that man must pass from degree to degree of progressive unfoldment until perfection is attained.

(*The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahā during His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, 2nd edn. (Wilmette: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1982), pp. 294–5) [5]

Evil is imperfection. Sin is the state of man in the world of the baser nature, for in nature exist defects such as injustice, tyranny, hatred, hostility, strife: these are characteristics of the lower plane of nature. These are the sins of the world, the fruits of the tree from which Adam did eat. Through education we must free ourselves from these imperfections. The Prophets of God have been sent, the Holy Books have been written, so that man may be made free.

(*Paris Talks: Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahā in Paris in 1911–1912* (London: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1979), pp. 177–8) [6]

There are no earth-bound souls. When the souls that are not good die they go entirely away from this earth and so cannot influence anyone. They are spiritually dead. Their thoughts can have influence only while they are alive on the earth. Caiaphas had great influence during his life but as soon as he died his influence ceased. It was of this kind that Christ said 'Let the

dead bury their dead.’ But the good souls are given eternal life and sometimes God permits their thoughts to reach the earth to help the people.

(*Daily Lessons Received at Acca – January, 1908* by Helen S. Goodall and Ella Goodall Cooper (Chicago: Bahā’ī Publishing Society, 1908), pp. 41–2) [7]

There is no power exercised over the people by those evil souls that have passed away. Good is stronger than evil and even when alive they had very little power. How much less have they after they are dead ...

(*Daily Lessons Received at Acca – January, 1908*, p. 51) [8]

From letters written by or on behalf of Shoghi Effendi

And as to the world’s evil plight, we need but recall the writings and sayings of Bahā’u’llāh, Who, more than fifty years ago, declared in terms prophetic the prime cause of the ills and sufferings of mankind, and set forth their true and divine remedy. ‘Should the Lamp of Religion be hidden,’ He declares, ‘chaos and confusion will ensue.’ How admirably fitting and applicable are these words to the present state of mankind!

(14 November 1923, written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahā’īs of the United States and Canada, published in *Bahā’ī Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932* (Wilmette: Bahā’ī Publishing Trust, 1980), p. 50) [9]

With regard to your question on that part of the ‘Words of Wisdom’ where Bahā’u’llāh states that true wisdom lies in the fear of God: The meaning is that mere man-made laws are not sufficient to deter man from all forms of evil. It needs in some cases the fear of God and in others the love of God to prevent him from doing evil and to lead him to the straight and true path of righteousness. I hope that this brief answer to your question explains the thought to you. Of course its ramifications and application into the various forms of social and spiritual evil are great, but a proper understanding of this divine injunction explains it all to us.

(27 May 1927, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [10]

In regard to your question concerning evil spirits and their influence upon souls, Shoghi Effendi wishes me to inform you that what is generally called evil spirit is a purely imaginary creation and has no reality whatever. But as to evil, there is no doubt that it exerts a very strong influence both in this world and in the next. ‘Abdu’l-Bahā in ‘Some Answered Questions’ gives us a thorough and true analysis of the problem of evil. You should preferably refer to that book for further explanation on that point.

(1 November 1934, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [11]

Regarding your question relative to the condition of those people who are described in the Gospel as being possessed of devils: this should be interpreted figuratively; devil or Satan is symbolic of evil and dark forces yielding to temptation.

(2 November 1938, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [12]

Evil forces do take control of our life, but it is within our power to free ourselves from falling under their subjection.

(26 November 1939, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [13]

The believers must realize that the forces of prejudice are, along with so many other evil practices, growing at present stronger in the darkness surrounding humanity. The Bahā'īs must exercise not only tact and judgement, but courage and confidence in the aid of Bahā'u'llāh, which He will vouchsafe to those who attempt to live up to His teachings, in their whole approach to this racial question. Too much hesitance, too great timidity in the face of public opinion, can be just as bad as too much disregard of the actual situation and the problems it involves.

(23 December 1941, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [14]

The youth are indeed those to whom the Cause should perforce offer its greatest appeal, as it holds alone the promise for their future security. Without that which Bahā'u'llāh has given to humanity the outlook for the future of the world would appear truly hopeless, for the evil forces in men's nature seem to have gained the ascendancy, and only a spiritual force, direct from God, can enable the good side of human nature to again assume command of men's lives.

(15 June 1945, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [15]

We know absence of light is darkness, but no one would assert darkness was not a fact. It exists even though it is only the absence of something else. So evil exists too, and we cannot close our eyes to it, even though it is a negative existence. We must seek to supplant it by good, and if we see an evil person is not influenceable by us, then we should shun his company for it is unhealthy ...

The Bahā'ī Faith teaches man was always potentially man, even when passing through lower stages of evolution. Because he has more powers, and subtler powers than the animal, when he turns towards evil he becomes more vicious than an animal because of these very powers.

(4 October 1950, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [16]

You should not be afraid anyone can affect your mind. Even when we want to catch the thoughts of those we love most we cannot do so, how much less can other people succeed in penetrating our minds.

(18 January 1951, written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer) [17]

From letters written by or on behalf of the Universal House of Justice

Your letter of 2 October 1970 reflects a number of concerns which have evoked interest from some Bahā'īs from time to time. Both 'Abdu'l-Bahā and Shoghi Effendi have replied to questions similar to those which you

raise, so their answers are available for elucidations of certain of these profound and perplexing issues. You have asked a number of questions which can be answered in some degree by the relevant passages below. In time a more thorough study of the Bahā'ī Writings will doubtless bring forth an ever greater illumination of these abstruse matters.

In this period of general world unrest and confusion there seems to be a current wave of interest in occult phenomena, in communication with other worlds, and in new and old kinds of spiritualism. With regard to the broad aspects of these subjects the beloved Guardian was most instructive, providing us with general guidelines in a 1954 letter to an inquirer, from which ... excerpts are quoted.

You ask why the Manifestation of God for this day, in other words, Bahā'u'llāh, has not given all the detailed answers to the theories advanced by occultists, spiritualists and many of the more abstruse philosophers of the present day.

It would be absolutely impossible for anyone to answer all the questions that might be asked by the curious, whether scholars or ordinary people, on any subject. We must turn aside from these vain imaginings and suppositions and philosophizings of the world, and fix our eyes upon the clear stream of the Teachings of Bahā'u'llāh. Out of these Teachings, and the society which they will create on this planet, will come a solution to all of the problems of men. Gradually, greater scholars, more deeply spiritual thinkers, will be able to answer from a Bahā'ī standpoint many of these questions. It is not necessary that they should be in the divine text; they can be studied and learned in the future; but at present we have not had time to evolve the Bahā'ī scholars who can deal with these subjects in detail, and take upon themselves to answer the abstruse points and the many unfounded doctrines which are advanced by modern philosophers ...

We must use the Writings of the Prophets as our measurement. If Bahā'u'llāh had attached the slightest importance to occult experiences, to the seeing of auras, to the hearing of mystic voices; if He had believed that reincarnation was a fact, He, Himself, would have mentioned all of these things in His Teachings. The fact that He passed over them in silence shows that to Him, they had either no importance or no reality, and were consequently not worthy to take up His time as the Divine Educator of the human race.

(29 November 1970, from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [18]

There are many passages in our scripture which bear on this point and there is no doubt that Bahā'u'llāh rejects the concept of a personal Devil or Satan, i.e. a being who is the source of evil power in opposition to God. We refer you to chapter 74 (LXXIV) in Part V of 'Some Answered Questions', where this subject is dealt with by the Master, Who clearly states that although there is evil it is the non-existence of good. In addition we suggest you refer to various passages from 'Cleanings from the Writings of Bahā'u'llāh'. The first of these on page 94 (American edition) speaks of the Evil One and then says: 'The Evil One is he that hindereth the rise and obstructeth the spiritual progress of the children of men.' On page 168 of that same book Bahā'u'llāh quotes: 'The Evil One is lying in wait, ready to entrap you. Gird yourselves

1. The letter referred to was written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi.

against his wicked devices, and, led by the light of the name of the one true God, deliver yourselves from the darkness that surroundeth you. Centre your thoughts in the Well-Beloved, rather than in your own selves.' Likewise, on page 284 Bahā'u'llāh speaks of the blind in heart following the promptings of the evil ones.

In addition we can offer you the following quotation from a letter written on behalf of the beloved Guardian to an individual believer: 'Regarding your question relative to the condition of those people who are described in the Gospel as being possessed of devils: this should be interpreted figuratively; the devil or Satan is symbolic of evil and dark forces yielding to temptation.' This answers specifically your question 'Symbolic of what?'

You can say without hesitation that the concept of Satan or the Devil as an actual being opposed to God is rejected by the Bahā'ī teachings but that the term is understood by Bahā'īs to mean the promptings of self and desire and the dark side of human nature.

(22 October 1971, from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [19]

We are confident that your National Spiritual Assembly is conscious of this problem, and tries to educate the friends not only to avoid such practices but to refuse to be influenced by them. The important thing is for your National Spiritual Assembly to bear in mind the necessity of deepening the friends in their knowledge of the teachings, reinforcing their trust and faith in the Cause of God in this day, and adding enrichment and illumination to their spiritual lives.

(18 July 1972, from the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly) [20]

In answer to those who may ask you what the stand is of your religion on the subject of demons, you can say without hesitation that the concept of Satan or the Devil as an actual being opposed to God is rejected by the Bahā'ī teachings but that the term is understood by Bahā'īs to mean the promptings of self and desire and the dark side of human nature.

(13 February 1974, from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [21]

Bahā'īs recognize that evil is negative and has no existence in its own right, but that does not mean that there is no power in evil. Do not Bahā'u'llāh and 'Abdu'l-Bahā warn us repeatedly of the spiritual infection of Covenant-breaking? In one of His Tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahā wrote:

... if you seek immunity from the sway of the forces of the contingent world, hang the 'Most Great Name' in your dwelling, wear the ring of the 'Most Great Name' on your finger, place the picture of 'Abdu'l-Bahā in your home and always recite the prayers that I have written. Then you will behold the marvellous effect they produce. Those so-called forces will prove but illusions and will be wiped out and exterminated.

(30 August 1984, from the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer) [22]

From a memorandum written by the Research Department to the Universal House of Justice

1. Concerning psychic powers:

'We do not understand their nature and have no way of being sure of what is true and what is false in such matters.' (Letter to an individual believer dated 4 March 1946)¹

People who have what they regard as psychic experiences are often so impressed by them that they tend to accord them great authority. It seems that this passage is intended to draw the believer's attention to the fact that, however moving such an experience may be, we have no way of being *sure* that it is true and is not just an erratic expression of the workings of the mind, whose mode of operation is still far from being scientifically ascertained. In other words, we are cautioned against playing with forces of which we know so little and, above all, against relying on them rather than on the clear guidance of the Manifestation of God or the voice of consultation. This does not mean, of course, that in the future science may not make strides in understanding more closely the nature of psychic experiences ...

5. 'You have asked regarding the influence of evil spirits. Evil spirits are deprived of eternal life. How then can they exercise any influence? But as eternal life is ordained for holy spirits, therefore their influence exists in all the divine worlds. At the time you were here, this question was accordingly answered, that after the ascension of the godly souls, great influence and wide-spreading bounties are destined for them, and all-encircling signs in the seen and unseen are decreed for them.' (From a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahā to Mrs. Ella Goodall Cooper published on pages 77 to 83 of *Daily Lessons Received at 'Akkā*, revised edition, published by the Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, Wilmette, in 1979)

We have been unable as yet to locate the original of this Tablet in order to check the translation. However, it seems clear that this statement is not referring to the influence of covenant-breakers in this world or to the satanic influence of one's own lower nature. The questioner is concerned about the influence of disembodied 'evil spirits' from the next world, and 'Abdu'l-Bahā is pointing out that she should have no such concern. An evil spirit is at that lower level of existence referred to as being 'spiritually dead', and therefore has no influence on this world from beyond the grave.

(26 October 1982) [23]