

Three portals of awareness
by Giuseppe Robiati

*“Through me pass into the painful city
Through me pass into eternal grief
Through me pass among the lost people”...*

*“...These words in dim colour
I beheld inscribed on the lintel of an archway...”*

The verses written by Dante Alighieri in the third canto of Divine Comedy's Inferno refer to the dreadful quote inscribed on the entrance door leading to hell.

Hypothetically, were the damned to leave Dante's hell, would they read these same verses before entering our world? I say this because observing the reality surrounding us today, I keep asking myself what distinguishes the life of those who read this inscription from outside the door mentioned by Alighieri and the conditions of those who live beyond it.

Does the exasperated attempt of humankind to adapt to the evolving environment distract it to such a point it doesn't realize the infernal planetary conditions it lives in? More than six billion people have adjusted to a situation of mere survival!

The world economy is crumbling; social justice has become synonymous of injustice, we dare to call “children” one fourth of the world population whom we exploit for labour, sexually abuse, sell as cattle, let die from starvation and disease, who are emotionally abandoned by self-centred parents; religions, which in the name of God, the Clement, the Merciful annihilate each other for power; politicians' attempts are merely focused on obtaining and maintaining personal privileges; the environment has reached the ultimate stage before implosion, education is forgotten, undervalued and geared only towards producing a mass of unaware consumer, emptied of meaning by inhuman methods and quiz-based systems; labour and business markets are reduced to a mad rush for making profits by a few, human beings are exhausted by daily conflicts, we feel hatred against whatever is not like us... This is the planet we live in, a planet which seems to have been forgotten by He who created it, deprived by its richness, abandoned to a cruel destiny, nearly reduced to “a painful city”.

Are we the “lost people” that Dante is writing about in the third canto?

Looking back with open and sincere eyes, we have to admit that the recently ended century, which witnessed many social, political and economic changes, we should honestly admit it has deprived us from what, most inherently belongs to us as human beings. We have given priority to physical appearance, we exaggerated the need to satisfy our material needs, we invented new needs through the media which focus their attention on consumption of unnecessary products, we have promoted unbalanced economic developments for the benefit of a few, we have forgotten values of equity and sharing, we have based an important part of our life on increasing consumption and, in exchange, have obtained a constantly and progressively unhealthy life conditions for the individual. Local and global media, piloted by a detrimental strategy of sensationalism and shocking first-page news, show us social tumours, life contradictions and conflicts. As the thirsty hobbling in the desert, we were infected by the “mirage”, by what we believe we see, but doesn't exist.

When we analyze the conditions of people's life and empathically (and systematically) listen to the inhabitants of this planet: young and old, women and children, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, white, black, religious and atheist, we all ask ourselves the same questions: "where are we going?" "does the goal of our life lie only in accumulating wealth and possessions, in satisfying every desire and tantrum?"

These are **"like unto a mirage in the desert, which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion."**¹, the wealth of the world resembling hills of sand that the wind moves everyday from one place to the next

The world is inhabited by roughly six billion people, most of whom committed to spend energies and money to reach this "mirage in the desert". Is it productive to keep spending time in this direction? Shouldn't we rather stop, drop our old beliefs to replace them with new ideas and with a spirit of change?

According to the writings of Baha'u'llah the human being is essentially a "spiritual being" and after carrying out his primary duties in life he should be interested in developing his inner being: **"Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath, however, deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess. Through a word proceeding out of the mouth of God he was called into being; by one word more he was guided to recognize the Source of his education; by yet another word his station and destiny were safeguarded.** The Great Being saith: **Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom"**².

In order to dig out and re-discover the gems of inestimable value dwelling in the inner being of every man the Baha'is of the world have implemented three effective tools which enable us to acquire the necessary awareness to know and understand the causes of this degrading world materialism and to help and correct it.

Causes:

- 1) man, who is essentially a spiritual being, has lost contact with his soul, his intangible essence, and therefore has deprived himself from the spiritual view of life
- 2) everyone believes their God is different; this causes fights and conflicts in the way they pray, worship and follow Him. All of this moves us further away from true religion.
- 3) Children, the majority of world population, are still deprived of the right to receive adequate education in many areas of the planet

Tools:

The three portals of awareness

- 1) study circles
- 2) devotional meetings
- 3) classes for the spiritual education of children

- 1) What is a study circle

The study circle is a tool which offers all people the chance to develop their own spirituality so that everyone can become more aware of their own higher destiny. The study circle is a course based on

¹ Baha'u'llah Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah p 327

² Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 259

Baha'u'llah's writings and is characterised by a participatory method, lack of rituals, flexibility artistic activities and a spirit of joy and friendship. What we mean by a participatory method means that nobody teaches, but everybody learns and shares together, assisted by a facilitator.

In order to have a study circle a minimum number of participants is not necessary because it can start even with three or four people. During this course one also tries to put into practice the capacities he is acquiring. Topics covered in the study circles are related to the inner essence of manna individual: what is spirituality, the reality of the soul, the concept of real prayer, life after death, the need to serve as a gift of oneself to others, the need to give, the right to love and to be loved, the need of a unitary vision, spirituality in practical aspects of life, work as worship etc.. The entire course enables the participant to go through 7 textbooks from which he draws inspiration, knowledge and consciously transforms his vision of life. **“ We cherish the hope that through the loving-kindness of the All-Wise, the All-Knowing, obscuring dust may be dispelled and the power of perception enhanced, that the people may discover the purpose for which they have been called into being. In this Day whatsoever serveth to reduce blindness and to increase vision is worthy of consideration.**

In this Day whatsoever serveth to reduce blindness and to increase vision is worthy of consideration. This vision acteth as the agent and guide for true knowledge. Indeed in the estimation of men of wisdom keenness of understanding is due to keenness of vision”³.

2. - What is a devotional meeting

The prayer or devotional meeting offers the chance to pray together the same Creator regardless of rituals and given places, including quotes from all Sacred Writings. People are used to pray, according to their cultural heritage, in specific sites for worship such as churches, mosques, synagogues and others, on specific days, following organised rituals structured by varied types of clergy, where people passively take part. Devotional meetings organised by Baha'is take place at friends' homes. There, writings, prayers, quotes from all religions are read and everybody can participate regardless of one's religious membership. After an inspiring musical portion, readings are shared in turn following some silent meditation. In the end people can share thoughts, feelings, experiences so that prayer can become not only a magnet for unity, but a chance to start out common projects. On the whole, God is One even if throughout history we imagined, called, thought and prayed Him in different ways. Today we can declare His oneness, worshipping Him together through prayers coming from different holy texts.

Over these years the experience we have been gathering with devotional meetings brought about a common desire by all inhabitants of the planet for a common Faith, a Faith in the same Holy Father.

3. - What is a children class

The greatest dangers of this era will burden children. In poor third world countries children die from diseases and privations due to poverty, in western industrialised countries children “die” from lack of love, from being emotionally abandoned, because parents are so focused on themselves and their personal fulfilment not to have time for the creatures they brought into the world. Future generations of youth and children, deprived of basic love and care, will develop mistrust, lack of affection, lack of vision in life. They are already experiencing serious difficulties, especially in interpersonal relations, with serious social consequences. On this topic Baha'is offer a programme of children classes which rises from the need and with the intention to help them to discover fundamental values for coexistence, such as recognition of a Single God, the existence of the soul and the need to develop spiritual qualities existing in each of us. All children of the world are

welcome in these classes, during which they will acquire not only the intellectual understanding of values but also, through a shared route, will enjoy the most beautiful qualities such as love, service, and unity so that these will become active forces in their current and future, professional life: a measuring scale and a compass which will be applicable forever **“Build ye for yourselves such houses as the rain and floods can never destroy, which shall protect you from the changes and chances of this life”⁴**.

These three portals of awareness are in action, systematically, in all nations of the world and are open and available to anyone who wishes to initiate a process of individual transformation.

The results achieved so far with these three pivotal activities are positive and encouraging due to the number of people who willingly got involved in almost all the countries of the planet. This gives hope that, on the wave of this increasing active participation and transformation process, the inscription on the doorway to hell could, at last, only be read...in the Divine Comedy. What about you, reader? Would you like to try?

⁴ Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 261