

Auguste Forel; His Life and Enlightenment*

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In the autumn of 1921 a celebrated scientist, entomologist and psychiatrist of Europe became the recipient of “one of the most weighty” tablets ever written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. “Lover of truth” (1), as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá called him, Dr. Auguste Henri Forel (1848–1931) was renowned for his original scientific research and his dedicated services to the world of humanity.

Born in 1848 at “La Gracieuse”, a country house near Morges, Switzerland, he spent his early childhood in Lonay and Nice. As a child he was extremely shy and bashful and he remained so throughout his youth. His mother, very fond of him, was over-anxious and unduly protective toward him and this limited to a great extent his relationship with other people. But out of his childhood isolation his imagination grew and he began to establish a profound friendship with nature and the insects. His fascination and genuine interest in the life and behavior of ants grew rapidly and from the age of 5 he began to collect different species of ants and study about them. This interest stayed with him all through his life and won him outstanding scientific credits for his original work and discoveries.

Religion played quite an important role in his early life, although he never really had a deep feeling for it. His mother, an orthodox Christian, was quite anxious to see him learning the Old Testament and New Testament, although he preferred the Tales of the Thousand and One Nights and the stories of Tom Thumb and Little Red Riding-Hood. He began his school, first at Maison Muret near Neuchâtel and then continued in Morges and Lausanne, Switzerland. While in Lausanne he was firmly instructed by his mother to attend the church with absolute regularity and he did so. But doubts about religion continued to grow in his mind. The confirmation class of Pastor Bridal, which he was to attend faithfully, became quite boring for him. The answers he received to his frank and serious questions were “unwilling and evasive” (3) Then came the end of the class in 1864 and the decisive moment for young Forel to declare his belief in God and Christianity on confirmation day. With downcast eyes and trembling hands as he appeared in Pastor Bridal’s office before the ceremony, he expressed his lack of belief in what he was expected to believe. He was disdained by the angry Pastor and cried bitterly on his way home. He never returned and gave up church and religion altogether. Although very profound in his love for and dedicated in his service to humanity he remained quite skeptical about the subject of God and religion. He was particularly critical of the hypocrisy and disharmony which he saw in religious fanatics and their system of dogmas.

Forel entered medicine at the University of Zurich and all through his medical school years he faithfully pursued his interest in the study of ants. His collection of colonies of ants expanded and he perfected himself in every aspect of his knowledge of this insect; physiology, biology, anatomy, systematic and even posology, as he experimented with the effect of some biochemical agents on them. His genuine zeal and unceasing curiosity in entomology, particularly learning about ants, constituted an enjoyable and productive part of his life as is reflected in his own memoirs. On a professional trip to Canada, he stopped once in Montreal. It was Sunday and he writes, “...of course, all the pious Canadians went to church on Sunday, so that on that day the business of the Lodge had to be suspended. I went into the great public park, where I spent the whole day looking for ants and there, I found a new slaveless variety of our European slave-holding ant, *Formica Sanguinea!*” (3) The collection of the colonies of ants in his lifetime was so vast and huge that after his death it took 7 truck-loads to carry them to the museum in Geneva (6).

Entomology and Medicine

In the years 1871–74, the following important events took place in Forel’s life: He completed his prize essay and his book on the “Ants of Switzerland”. Upon the appearance of this excellent scientific treatise in entomology the Swiss Natural History Society awarded him the Schafli prize. In 1874 he published his book on the “Ants of Switzerland” and was awarded another prize, the Thore prize given by the Paris Academy of Science. Forel corresponded with Charles Darwin about his work on ants, sent him a volume of his book and received encouraging responses.

In 1872, Forel completed his study of medicine and he began to show interest in psychiatry. At his medical graduation dinner, one of his guests raised this question: “Why is Forel deserting the ants for psychiatry?” The answer he got was, “Forel s’occupait de fourmis (fous remis) maintenant il passe aux fous à remettre!”* (3)

Another important event in these years was a trip he took to Vienna where Forel spent seven months working with the brilliant brain specialist of his time, Meynert. Brain anatomy was a special area of his interest and he was known with respect and distinction in this field. In the spring of 1873, he went to Paris where he visited mental hospitals and explored psychiatric advancements.

Career in Psychiatry

Pursuing his interest in psychiatry, he began to work in a mental hospital in Munich, Germany. It was in this hospital that Forel initiated the novel concept of opening an observation ward for patients. Emil Kraepelin, world famous psychiatrist, who succeeded Forel in that hospital, advanced further this concept and developed a system of treatment in observation wards which was then generally adopted.

His work in Munich led him to recognize the root of alcoholism and the important role of alcohol in mental disorders. He then launched a life-long campaign in prevention and treatment of alcoholic problems in society. He was an active member of the Anti-Alcoholic Society and the Society for the Improvement of Morality. He travelled extensively to numerous countries around the world and fought for his cause against alcoholic consumption and its destructive effects on the human mind and body. Forel's view of alcohol in society and his concern for the right of mental patients explain some aspects of his professional ethics. His invaluable service to humanity merited him distinguished prizes and honors, particularly in Europe.

In 1879 when he was only 30 years old he was appointed as the Director of Burgholzli Psychiatric Institute and Professor at the University of Zurich. Forel was quite gifted in exploring and explaining different frontiers of brain anatomy and psychiatry. His interests covered areas such as neuroanatomy, neurophysiology, forensic psychiatry, transitional stages between mental health and disorders, and the role of education in alcoholism and in mental health and disorders. He was also interested in true monism or unity between cerebral and psychic phenomena. He studied extensively the problem of sexuality and his book on "The Sexual Problem" (1905) gained a considerable recognition. (5) His interest in sexuality is more in respect to medical and anthropological curiosities. In respect to psychoanalysis, Forel recognizes some truth in Breuer's cathartic method, but he utterly rejects what he considers Freud's exaggerations concerning infantile sexuality, dream interpretation and so on. Some psychiatrists (5) believe that Auguste Forel and Eugene Bleuler (1857–1939) more likely had a basic orientation which had much in common with psychoanalysis although they did not subscribe themselves to that school of thought.

In treatment he used hypnosis which he learned from Hippolyte Bernheim while working with him in Nancy, France. He taught hypnosis at the University of Zurich and he wrote a book on this subject (*Der Hypnotismus*, 1889) in which he supports Oskar Vogt's (1870–1959) view that hypnosis is a "neurodynamic inhibition" caused by "cortical exhaustion." (5) Forel also used psychotherapy and he was the founder of the Society of Psychotherapy and Medical Psychology. Adolf Meyer (1866–1950), one of the distinguished psychiatrists of the world and the founder of psychobiology, who made a tremendous contribution to modern American psychiatry was once a pupil and coworker of Auguste Forel.

In July 1916 Forel resolved that he was then an active socialist, but his ideology of socialism, like his concept of psychiatry, was deeply rooted in ethics. He believed in socialism without violence and he disapproved of Communism. To him capitalism and alcoholism had much in common and he fought against both. He defined his own concept of socialism saying: "Socialism will either be ethical, or it will not be," and he perceived ethics in the following light: "Ethics consists in practicing the higher altruism, in sacrificing the ego for others and in the highest sense for humanity, that is, for the social welfare of all." (3)

Forel was active in a number of internationally respected societies and associations. He was awarded an honorary degree of doctorate in Philosophy, and also doctorate in Law. He was a noble man with some characteristic qualities such as honesty, humility, frankness, and wit. He had a broad vision of the world and deplored ignorance and prejudice as some of the causes of wars.

He married in 1883 and had six children. The eldest one, a son, Edouard, who studied medicine, died in 1912 causing Forel deep grief. In the following year he had a stroke with hemiplegia from which he recovered to some extent.

Forel and the Bahá'í Faith

In December 1917, before he knew about the Bahá'í Faith, he published "Religion of Social Good". In March 1919, he completed this idea by adding the term "Scientific Religion" to it. Then his new and rather elaborated concept of religion was called "Scientific Religion of Social Good" (4) which he withdrew when he recognized the Bahá'í Faith. The completion of his creation of a scientific religion coincided with his discovery of the Bahá'í Faith. He came to know the Bahá'í Faith at the house of his son-in-law Dr. A. Brauns, who was a Bahá'í, in January 1921. But he apparently had some initial contact earlier in 1920 as he mentions in his will.

Needless to say, his bitter past experiences with religious belief and bigoted clergymen made it extremely difficult for him to accept religious truth without reservation. When he heard about the Bahá'í teachings, two principles in particular, attracted him. (6) One was his discovery that in the Bahá'í Faith work is respected as worship. This excited him tremendously. The other was the Bahá'í position of complete abstinence from alcohol, a

principle for which he had devoted his life. These and many other social principles attracted his heart, but in his searching mind he still needed answers to some of the very fundamental questions. On July 28, 1921 Forel wrote a letter to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and in that letter he raised a number of questions. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá answered his questions in a lengthy Tablet on September 21, 1921 (1) just about two months prior to His Own passing. The Guardian considered this Tablet as “one of the most weighty the Master ever wrote”. (2) In this Tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá praises Forel as a “revered personage, lover of truth...” He explains for him, among other things, the relationship between the mental faculties and the soul by comparing it to the relationship between the rays of the sun and the sun. The power of the mind is limited to the condition of the body and its natural senses, while the soul is a power that is free. That is to say, if the mind lost its capacity to reason, the power of the soul would still continue to exist. “Abdu’l-Bahá also elaborates on the question of Divinity about which Forel had been quite disillusioned and discouraged all through his life.

Upon the receipt of this significant Tablet, Forel was full of joy and gratitude in being able to comprehend the divine realities. At last he had found his answers. From then on he proclaimed the Faith to many, either in public addresses or in private talks. His wife, Emma Steinherl, embraced the Faith and his daughter Marta Brauns Forel who also assisted him as his secretary became a devoted believer of Bahá’u’lláh and rendered meritorious services to the progress of the Cause in Europe. The name of the Faith began to ring in many scientific circles in which Forel was greatly respected. His beautiful nine-sided arbour overlooking Lac Lemán in Switzerland was a gathering place on Sundays where he used to give the message of Bahá’u’lláh to many of his guests and visitors, including some of his fellow scientists. (6) Even during the last night of his life he was teaching his gardeners about the Faith. He believed that, “There is bound to be a world state, a universal language, and a universal religion.” He also stated, “The Bahá’í Movement for the oneness of mankind is, in my estimation, the greatest movement today working for universal peace and brotherhood”. (2)

He died in 1931 and in his will he states, “In 1920 I learned at Karlsruhe of the supraconfessional world religion of the Bahá’ís, founded in the Orient seventy years ago by a Persian, Bahá’u’lláh. This is the real religion of ‘Social Welfare’ without dogmas or priests, binding together all men of this small terrestrial globe of ours. I have become a Bahá’í. May this religion live and prosper for the good of humanity! This is my most ardent desire.” (3)

* “Forel was busy with the ants; now he’s going to cure the mad!” It’s a play on words between *fourmis* (ants) and *fous remis* (recovered madmen).

References

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