

Ethics for a Global Society

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Abstract: The article deals with a process of apocalyptic dimensions: the collapse of the moral order; the disintegration of value systems over the last few decades; the lack of moral orientation. We are now living with these consequences. These events came to pass precisely at the time when the emergent world society is in need of a global ethic, a universal standard of values, ideals and goals—a need reflected in the "Declaration toward a Global Ethic" of the recent World Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which outlined a "minimal ethic" based on common values of the great world religions. However, a new hierarchy of values, a new ethic for global society has come into the world through Bahá'u'lláh's legislation in His revelation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

I.

We are living in a time of a global upheaval. Everything that seemed to be fixed and solid has been seized by the storm of change. As Bahá'u'lláh foretold, the "world's equilibrium" has been "upset" and the "present-day order," "lamentably defective," is being "rolled up."⁽²⁾ The collapse of the prevailing order; the radical change to a new order of things, to a level of a greater complexity and more coherent organisation; the breakthrough of the present world-society to a world-commonwealth integrating all nations, to a "new World Order;"⁽³⁾ all this entails chaos and catastrophe. Many people feel that their very existence is threatened. Many see in these events the "Horsemen of the Apocalypse."

In this process of change, nothing has undoubtedly had such a far-reaching, radical effect on society and human thought as the change in moral views, ideas, and concepts which took place during the past few decades. There are no longer reliable answers to such crucial questions as: What is man? What is the purpose of his existence? What standards should man live by? What is good and what is evil? What is permitted and what prohibited? There is no moral orientation, nothing to hold on to. Within a few decades a change in the way people think has taken place with almost breath-taking speed. It can certainly be described as a cultural revolution when one considers its far-reaching consequences. Norms and values which have been established by religion, and have been handed on, kept alive and considered absolutely valid for two thousand years, and were even recognized by the rationalists of the Enlightenment in the 18th century as rational values, were swept away within a few decades. After losing their transcendental basis they were open to critical questioning, and were soon dissolved in the acid bath of a one-dimensional rationalism, that attitude which does not allow anything to have validity unless it can be established by empirical reason. I have described this process of disintegration of the value systems and its consequences in my book *The Imperishable Dominion: The Bahá'í Faith and the Future of Mankind*.⁽⁴⁾ Its end result is a spiritual vacuum, which is becoming increasingly evident, and a lack of moral orientation, which is threatening society from inside.

Mankind's most crucial problems such as the ecological crisis, the population explosion, the economic injustice of the present system of world economics and the resulting North-South conflict, tyranny and despotism, civil war, and above all the outbursts of irrational violence in every part of the world —these problems of man's survival can only be solved on a worldwide basis or not at all. But at the very same time as nations are challenged to develop a co-operative global system capable of acting in solidarity,

society is rapidly disintegrating and losing its structures. The bonds which hold society together are weakening constantly, living together with others is becoming increasingly more difficult, and the number of conflicts is ever on the rise.

Probably nothing shows the decline of traditional morals and the sickness of our society as clearly as the new dimension of evil with which we are confronted: the brutalization of our world by the increase in violence. A British writer, Gordon Rattray Taylor, described this process in the 1970s in his book *How to Avoid the Future* and stated: "Just as high temperature warns us that all is not well in the body, so violence is an indication that something is wrong in society." (5) This phenomenon confronts us in the rapidly increasing readiness to settle conflicts with violence. Violence may well be as old as humanity, but its impact within highly technological societies, its saturation in the media, and its presence in our daily lives, is new. Friedrich Hacker, in his best-seller on violence, described its nature, and the extent to which violence has become part of our lives.

The most horrifying dimension of modern brutalization is not that individual and collective violence flares up more frequently...but that it is becoming more and more common and customary. Violence has become an everyday, natural trivial event, a banal trifle.... We are already so insensible that it needs a significant escalation of violence or especially dramatic acts of brutality to rouse us up out of our dull indifference, which supposedly derives from our feeling of helplessness.(6)

A society progressively loses its cohesion and is destined to perish, if there are no ultimate values, no absolute obligations, if there is no civic sense (which was called "*civitas*" by the ancient Romans), that "spontaneous willingness to obey the law, to respect the rights of the others, to forego the temptations of private enrichment at the expense of the public weal." (7) Society cannot survive if its members have lost the ability to share and sacrifice, if everyone furthers only his own rights and pursues his own interests, if the highest aim in life is the utopia of living in *luxe, calme et volupté*, as Baudelaire defined it,(8) if society is based on hedonism and egotism.

The cultural crisis of the West, announced and analysed by philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Spengler, has developed into a global crisis of human civilisation, which endangers the survival of mankind. What is the cause of this process and where is it leading us?

II.

At some time or other in his phylogenesis, before recorded history, man escaped from the barriers of his instincts. He was no longer exposed to the compulsions of nature. He gained freedom and then had to gain control over his urges by conscious action, a uniquely human endeavour; the animal does not act, it reacts.

Man's grandeur and dignity are his freedom. However, this is also what endangers him. In gaining freedom he lost the automatic security of animal instincts. From then, he had to derive his direction from values. All human societies have systems of generally accepted values at their disposal, which provide goals, means, and orientation for the individual as well as for society. History reveals that mankind's great value systems are rooted in the great historic religions and their civilisations. Western civilisation is largely a genuinely Christian one, although the contribution of Judaism, the culture of antiquity, and later, Islam was significant. The values and standards people followed were an integral part of their faith, from which they also obtained their highest motivation for moral conduct.

For 300 years, however, the foundation of these values, the Christian Faith, has been in retreat. It is no longer the standard and the centre of life; it is drifting to the periphery. Atheism has become a political movement. For seventy years, in socialist countries a militant, missionary atheism was the dominant

ingredient of state doctrine. In these countries, religion survived in the underground; several generations grew up without any religious education. However, in liberal democracies too, religious traditions are withering. Symptoms of the decay of Christendom are seen in the dramatic exodus from the Church—in Germany every year some hundred thousands of Catholics and Protestants resign from Church membership.(9) Today most parents no longer impart a religious consciousness to their children; religion is no longer discussed in families. Church leaders frankly admit that Europe is no longer a Christian continent.(10)

This crisis is especially reflected in the increasing rejection of institutionalised Christianity among the youth who have turned instead to materialism and self-centredness. A study commissioned by the Protestant Church, Heiner Barz, professor at the University of Heidelberg, concludes that the younger generation rejects any doctrine and suspects all traditions received from their parents and any institutions. In the Church they see primarily a "power apparatus" identical with that of the Party, the State, or the tax office. According to Barz, the Christian image of Jesus and the symbols of Christianity are of little relevance, its teachings frequently unknown, and the youth are either ignorant of the concept of "sin" or dismiss it as "outdated."(11)

The crisis of Christianity and, in its wake, the crisis of morals has been on the way for a long time, at least since the European Enlightenment, that Copernican revolution of thought, which began in the 17th century and moulded the West. This new attitude was based on a belief in the power of reason, on the conviction of the absolute certainty of rational knowledge: "Faith in the old presuppositions and authorities, for so long considered valid beyond question, gave way to a spirit of criticism. Reason claimed to be autonomous and set itself up as the unique court of appeal."(12) The spirit of modernism, which made a method of doubt, has profoundly changed the world. It was the ideal for man in his newly-attained independence and maturity to be liberated from prejudice and preconceived ideas and at the same time to hold a commitment to methodological discipline and absolute objectivity. This new way of thought has laid the foundation of our scientific-technical civilisation. In the field of law we owe to it great victories over barbarism: the principles of equality before the law and of the separation of powers, the triumphant advance of democracy, the abolition of torture and the humanisation of penal law, in short, the modern constitutional state, a state which binds the power of the ruler to the law and protects the citizen from governmental arbitrariness.

However, the spirit of modernism is also responsible for the deep crisis of faith and, in its wake, the crisis of morals. Doubt was cast upon the Christian revelation, religion was declared to be superfluous, even detrimental. Or, as Bertolt Brecht put it in his drama "Galileo Galilei": "Belief has prevailed for a thousand years, but now doubt has taken its place.... Doubt is cast on time-honoured truths, and what always used to be taken for granted is now questioned."(13) It is one of the central dogmas of the philosophy of the Enlightenment that religion is destined to wither away. Nietzsche's formula "God is dead!" has become the slogan of the century. Secular society—a society in which religion has been banned—and the mature autonomous man, i.e. an individual emancipated from the traditions of the past and absolutely self-determining, have become the goal and direction of the people.

Belief in God has been replaced by belief in reason and human progress, by faith in the completion of history, by science and technology. Messianic expectations have been replaced by the utopia of a man-made paradise. Man's conviction that he is able to create a better world, the "Messianic Kingdom," by rational analysis and political action have superseded the transcendental promises of salvation.(14) Thus, the world has been made rational and technical, and, as a consequence, utilitarian. What remains is a vast emptiness in which man is cut off from his metaphysical origins, and left impoverished with merely the affairs of this world to care about: discovery, invention, progress, achievement, production, and consumption.

Now, at the end of the second millennium, the optimistic belief in the omnipotence of reason and the Enlightenment, in science and progress, has dwindled. Jürgen Habermas has diagnosed perplexity among intellectuals and politicians, a lack of confidence in Western civilisation(15).

The deficiencies of an unbalanced Enlightenment are becoming increasingly evident. The fading Christian faith has left a vacuum which has, as Nietzsche clearly predicted, seized everything which is built on this faith: "For example our entire European morality."(16) Nietzsche called this phenomenon of the devaluation of the highest values and the lack of meaning *nihilism*: "The aim is lacking; 'why' finds no answer."(17) Nihilism is the conviction "that nothing has any value, that no standards are binding, that no purpose exists, that there is nothing worth living or dying for, that everything is futile".(18) Russian writers like Ivan Turgenev and Fyodor Dostoevsky described the spreading spiritual vacuum, and European thinkers from the nineteenth century clearly anticipated its consequences. Nihilism has become the shaping power of our civilisation: "The frustration, the embitterment, the hatred of history, of the illusions of the past and the reality of today are the origin of that nihilism which is inundating us. Nihilism is the other side of the hope for a man-made paradise. We have arrived on the other side of the coin."(19)

The philosophers of the Enlightenment vehemently refused to accept the reproach that atheism means amorality, and the prognosis that the decline of religion would finally cause the devaluation of moral values. Pierre Joseph Proudhon [1809-1865] wrote: "L'homme est destiné à vivre sans religion.... La loi morale est éternelle et absolue.... Eh, qui donc aujourd'hui oserai attaquer la morale?"(20) The values were regarded as natural, self-evident and generally valid for all time—eternal truths arrived at by reason. However, what seemed to be self-evident and absolutely valid has been critically questioned little by little, and finally dissolved. The absoluteness of moral obligations was abandoned and replaced by a pluralism of non-obligatory value concepts, by relativism and subjectivism. A non-obligatory, pluralistic ethics, however, is a "Lichtenberg knife," a knife without a handle and a blade.(21)

The implications of this process are obvious: if rational proof is the only gauge for evaluating an ethical norm, then a norm that commands positive action can only be recognized if it is of proven advantage to all; equally, one that has a prohibitive function can only be recognized when the social harm of the prohibited act is evident to all. This means that any value you are pleading for is in need of rational justification. However, even if you can supply a norm which you believe is based on cogent reasons, you never can convince another person who has a different view. This is why Bahá'ís face endless discussions when they offer their moral concepts. Although the prohibition of narcotics and alcoholic beverages can be justified on the basis of an abundance of medical and social reasons, most people react with criticism. And if you mention a virtue like chastity, a word which has almost completely fallen out of usage, it gives rise to mockery or biting sarcasm: you are looked at as if you had come from another planet.

This critical attitude of the mind, which recognises none but rational values automatically rejects the notion of unconditional duties and the existence of generally binding norms. Every human being is then the supreme judge of the norms of his life-style and of the social order. That is the meaning of the new ideal of "self-determination" and "maturity," whereas the recognition of an authority which cannot be questioned, and the observance of its commandments is contemptuously dismissed as "immaturity":

The illusion is cherished that everyone by means of his own mental efforts will be able to realize what he should do and will be capable of making a free choice for or against what should be done... Thus, the individual with his subjective desires, his chance experiences, his restricted knowledge and his limited understanding is granted the right to consider himself the measure of all things.(22)

The consequences:

The belief in absolute duties is replaced by calculating adaptation to the contingencies of the day. The love for ideals which demand that man overcome his egocentricity cannot emerge in a society in which it is considered 'progressive' to doubt everything. As this love dwindles, so does the motivation to exert oneself in ethical areas and the energy to devote oneself unselfishly to greater tasks... In such a spiritual climate, the growth of egotism is accompanied by the spread of pessimism and the foreboding of destruction. One becomes indifferent to the welfare of others and is only concerned to get the best for oneself as long as this is still possible.(23)

The emancipation of morals (from religion) which appeared at the beginning of modern times was followed by the emancipation of man (from morals). When value systems are separated from the soil of divine revelation, they shatter. Without God, morality has no foundation, no hold, no support. Dostoevsky was referring to this consequence when he had Ivan Karamazov say: "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted. If there is no God, then nothing matters."(24)

III.

The need for ethic, though, is increasingly recognised. Compared to decades of virtual silence on the subject, philosophers are now focusing on it again, indicated by the increasing number of publications in the field. However, all the secular attempts of moral philosophy to found a rational ethical system which is both practicable and generally obligatory have failed. Its failure, in which British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre recognizes the very cause of the crisis of Western civilisation,(25) is because no moral rules can be deduced conclusively from an abstract concept of man, from man's "dignity." Reason is not able to make "thou shalt" statements which are clear and acceptable to unanimous agreement. The question of man's "dignity" cannot be answered without reference to a clear concept of man. The nature of man, however, is a question beyond rational, empirical, and scientific knowledge. The concepts offered by the humanities are focused on man's biological nature. They reduce man to his biological, chemical, and anatomical elements and deny his freedom and his dignity. B.F. Skinner's well-known work *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*(26) demonstrates this denial of guilt, responsibility, and the existence of objective values. Moreover, moral obligations based on reason alone, even if they could be made evident, cannot be invested with the inner authority that urges the individual to comply with standards created by himself: "Why should man shy away from barriers which he or his kind have erected?"(27)

With each day it is becoming increasingly evident that mankind's survival is not an issue of technology and pragmatism, but one of new binding values and goals for the individual, of political actions based on a set of generally accepted values appropriate to the conditions of a global society. Bertolt Brecht's slogan "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann die Moral!"(28) has been disproved by historical experience. The states of the former Soviet Union have painfully shown that without morals there may be no more "grub". Western relief aimed at old people and children in Russian cities nearly failed when corrupt officials stole or sold charity on the black market.

What is to be done? How can dying morality be revived? How can people be motivated to submit themselves to norms which demand much of them? How can they be induced to do good and to shun evil? What can cause them not to lie, deceive, or steal? What can cause people to overcome greed, envy, and hatred, to restrain their basic instincts, to resist the temptations of corruption, to sacrifice for others, to be "a good man" in a world where "Supplies are scarce and human beings base?"(29)

Normative ethics have always been based on religion's system of trans-cendental values and ideals. Religion translates values into standards of behaviour, passes them on by education to the young and keeps them alive in the consciousness of society. The question of whether man possesses an innate sense of justice was put to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He answered in the negative and stressed man's dependence on divine revelation:

If we ponder the lessons of history it will become evident that this very sense of honour and dignity is itself one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God. We also observe in infants the signs of aggression and lawlessness, and that if a child is deprived of a teacher's instructions his undesirable qualities increase from one moment to the next. It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honour is the result of education.... Even if we grant for the sake of the argument that instinctive intelligence and the innate moral quality would prevent wrong-doing, it is obvious that individuals so characterized are as rare as the philosopher's stone.... Universal benefits derive from the grace of the Divine religions, for they lead their true followers to sincerity of intents, to high purpose, to purity and spotless honour, to surpassing kindness and compassion, to the keeping of their covenants when they have covenanted, to concern for the rights of others, to liberality, to justice in every respect of life, to humanity and philanthropy, to valour and to unflinching efforts in the service of mankind. It is religion, to sum up, which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilisation.(30)

A reconstruction of morals comes only from a living faith. Values can only be absolutely valid if they are not in need of rational justification, if they are not in contradiction to reason, but at the same time are immune to criticism. That means that they are based on God as the law-giver. Nothing but such a morality can ever hope to overcome the prevailing pluralism and relativism of all moral concepts, and to motivate people to accept and obey it.

Mankind's global society is in need of a global code of ethics. Hans Küng, a renowned Catholic theologian, has acknowledged that this world only has a chance of survival if it is endowed with a common, universal standard of values, ideals and goals. In his brilliant book, *Global Responsibility*, he presents the opinion that such a world ethos can only be based on the common values of the great world religions, as only religion can provide man with an apodeictic, categorical, absolute norm which is also practical.(31) The recent centenary celebration of the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago has approved a "Declaration Toward a Global Ethic." Seven thousand representatives of the world's religions signed and solemnly presented a statement of a minimal ethic on which all could agree.(32)

In fact, the project of a "global ethic" began 120 years ago when Bahá'u'lláh revealed the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, the Charter of a divine legislation. The Bahá'í Faith offers a new ethical system, a new hierarchy of values for global society, anchored in divine revelation. It provides mankind with a new spiritual impulse for a new ethos. As in the past, this new ethos is brought about by the Word of God, which, as Bahá'u'lláh says, "alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change"(33) for the spiritual rebirth of man. Bahá'u'lláh declares its power to transform: "The day is approaching when God will have, by an act of His Will, raised up a race of man the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God, the All-Powerful, the Self-Subsisting."(34)

End Notes

1. Based on a presentation made at the National Bahá'í Conference in Llandudno, Wales, October 1993. It will be followed by the paper "The New Morality" in the next *Review*.
2. Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre: 1992) 181; *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) 11:27; *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) 4:2, 143:3.
3. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* 181.
4. (Oxford: George Ronald, 1983) 33ff.
5. (London: Secker & Warburg, 1975) 31.
6. *Aggression*, (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1973) 13.

7. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (London: Heinemann, 1975) 245.
8. "in luxury, leisure and lust," from the poem, "L'invitation au voyage," in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, XLIX. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
9. In 1991 and 1993, more than 500,000 left the Church in Germany.
10. For further discussion, see Schaefer, *Imperishable Dominion* chapter 1.
11. Heiner Barz, *Postmoderne Religion am Beispiel der jungen Generation in den Alten Bundesländern*, mit einem Vorwort von Thomas Luckmann, Teil 2 des Forschungsberichts "Jugend und Religion", (Opladen 1992) vol. 2, 137, 172, 251, 261.
12. Theodor Greene, *The Historical Context and Religious Significance of Kant's Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960) ix.
13. Bertolt Brecht, "The Threepenny Opera," in *From the Modern Repertoire*, ed. Eric Bentley, Series two (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1949) scene 1.
14. On the secular salvation, cf. Schaefer, *Imperishable* 10ff.
15. One of the most prominent contemporary German philosophers in the tradition of the Frankfurt School, *Die neue Unübersichtlichkeit* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1985) 143.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom* (London: George Unwin & Allen, 1924) no. 343.
17. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (London: Widenfeld and Nicolson, 1968) 1,2.
18. Wolfgang Brezinka, *Erziehung und Kulturrevolution. Die Pädagogik der Neuen Linken*, 2d rev. ed. (Ernst Reinhardt Verlag: München-Basel, 1976) 46.
19. Wolfgang Kraus, *Nihilismus heute oder Die Geduld der Weltgeschichte* (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer Verlag, 1985) 138.
20. P.-J. Proudhon, *De la Création de l'ordre dans l'humanité, ou principes d'organisation politique* (Paris-Besançon 1843) 38, no. 60. "Man is destined to live without religion... Moral law is eternal and absolute... Who then would dare to attack morality today?"
21. Georg Lichtenberg (1742-1799), a physicist at the University of Göttingen, famous for his aphorisms.
22. Brezinka, *Erziehung* 16.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *The Brothers Karamazov*.
25. *After Virtue, A Study in Moral Theory* (Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1984).
26. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977.
27. August Messer and Max Pribilla, *Katholisches und modernes Denken. Ein Gedankenaustausch über Gotteserkenntnis und Sittlichkeit zwischen August Messer und Max Pribilla SJ* (Stuttgart 1924) 95.
28. From "The Three-Penny Opera." ("First comes the grub, then the morals" - the German is much more expressive.)
29. *Ibid*, *1st Three-Penny Finale*.
30. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 2d ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970) 97.
31. *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (London: SCM, 1991).
32. See Hans Küng and Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic; The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions* (London: SCM, 1993).
33. *Gleanings* 99.
34. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) 109-110, cf. *Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971) 26