

Excerpts from
“Love, Power, and Justice: The Dynamics of Authentic Morality”
[and Authentic Religion]
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Excerpts all taken from Chapter One (“**The Nature of Authentic Morality**”).
One comment [in brackets] and some highlights are added by Greg Kagira-Watson
Further description and review of the book can be found on the web at
<http://bahai-library.com/reviews/hatcher.love.html>



1. The Supreme Value in Creation: the Human Being

Human moral development requires an understanding of the nature of value, both intrinsic value—arising from the inherent properties of an entity, and extrinsic value—which we attribute to an entity through subjective preferences (so-called value choices) and social conventions. An example of the latter is the value generally attributed to money, which in itself is nothing more than ink on paper, a highly ephemeral entity that quickly deteriorates into a formless mass of colored fibers.

Since intrinsic value is inherent in the very nature (essence) of any given entity (existent), it is objective. . . .

The ultimate source of all intrinsic values is God, for He is the Creator who has alone determined the inner structure and degree of refinement of each entity in existence. God Himself is thus the ultimate value, the uncreated, supreme value in all existence. He is therefore the ultimate end and goal of all human moral striving. Indeed, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh (1817—1892), affirms that pursuit of the knowledge and love of God is the very purpose of our existence:

All praise to the unity of God, and all honor to Him, the sovereign Lord, . . . Who, Out of utter nothingness, hath created the reality of all things. . . Having created the world and all that liveth and moveth therein, He, through the direct operation of His unconstrained and sovereign Will, chose to confer upon man the unique distinction and capacity to know Him and to love Him—a capacity that must needs be regarded as the generating impulse and the primary purpose underlying the whole of creation. . . . 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.¹

Because the “reality of man” (the human soul) capable of reflecting all the attributes of God, the human being is the apex of creation, the highest created value; and the Manifestations of God

¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 64—65.

(the founders of the great religions of history), because they reflect perfectly these attributes, are the apex of humanity:

From that which hath been said it becometh evident that all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. . . . Man, the noblest and most perfect of all created things, excelleth them all in the intensity of this revelation, and is a fuller expression of its glory. And of all men, the most accomplished, the most distinguished, and the most excellent are the Manifestations of the Sun of Truth. Nay, all else besides these Manifestations, live by the operation of Their Will, and move and have their being through the outpourings of Their grace.²

Since the God-given value of humankind is inherent in our essential nature, it is intrinsic and, since it is shared by all humans, it is universal. **Moral education is the process of apprehending and then expressing this value.** Bahá'u'lláh explains that this is a process of development, a progressive unfolding of the God-given potential within us. The Manifestation is the source of the knowledge that drives this process.

Through the Teachings of this Day Star of Truth every man will advance and develop until he attaineth the station at which he can manifest all the potential forces with which his inmost true self hath been endowed. It is for this very purpose that in every age and dispensation the Prophets of God and His chosen Ones have appeared amongst men, and have evinced such power as is born of God and such might as only the Eternal can reveal.³

As Bahá'u'lláh stresses here, the very purpose and meaning of religion is the development of the highest value in creation—the intrinsic spiritual capacities of the human being. **Thus defined, religion consists of a vertical relationship between God and humanity, and a lateral relationship between human beings, based on the vertical relationship each and all have with God.** Since human spiritual development is the supreme value in creation, all other created values are subsidiary (and inferior) to the value of the human being and his development.

Any moral system holds that lesser values can and should be sacrificed (used as means) to obtain higher values: Higher values are the ends and lower values are the means to these ends. Thus, the essence of immorality is to confuse means and ends, thereby sacrificing higher values in the pursuit of lower ones. (A classic example is the thief, who sacrifices the higher value of authentic trustworthiness, and the lasting benefits it bestows, in order to obtain an ephemeral, often trivial, material value.)

In particular, God cannot be used as a means to obtain some other (necessarily lower) value. Since we can never actually attain to God or Godship, God has Himself ordained that the establishment of an ongoing, authentic relationship with Him represents for us the pursuit of the Divine as the ultimate value. This means that the true value of anything in creation can only be understood with reference to God. We must learn to see the Hand and Purpose of God in everything:

² Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 178—179

³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 68

all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them. . . . “No thing have I perceived, except that I perceived God within it, God before it, or God after it.”⁴

True religion is thus a living, dynamic relationship, not an ideology, a set of social conventions, or a formula for living one’s life. However, these latter notions are ways in which religion and morality are often viewed. We therefore take time in the next sections to distinguish carefully between authentic morality and its various non-authentic alternatives.

2. Religion and Morality: the Pursuit of Authentic Relationships

The Being (Self) of God is the *supreme value in existence* and the Human Being is the *supreme value in creation*. Religion (religia) is the name we give to the relationship or link between these two values, God and humanity. The living embodiment of this link is the Manifestation. Religion thus consists of three fundamental components: God, Man, and the relationship between God and Man, namely the Manifestation. The fact that the Manifestation reflects perfectly the attributes of God means that the Manifestation can represent God in relation to ordinary humans. But since the Manifestation also has an individual, human soul and a physical body, He can, at the same time, represent humanity in relationship to God.⁵

Of course, everyone has a relationship to God and to other humans, whether he likes it or not. Thus, it is important to stress that true religion means a particular relationship (or quality of relationship) to God and to others, and not just any possible relationship. To distinguish true religion from other kinds of relationships, we will define true religion as the establishment of an authentic relationship between the self and God and between the self and other humans.

Similarly, we will henceforth speak of authentic religion to distinguish true religion from other conceptions of the nature of religion.

Even more generally, we can say that our relationship with any given category of existence is *authentic* to the degree that it is based on an accurate perception of the structure of reality. To interact authentically with reality is thus to interact in such a way that the intrinsic and universal values embedded in reality become known to us.

Thus defined, **authenticity** is a generalization of the notion of validity, which occurs in science and logic, where “valid” means “in conformity with reality.” However, validity is usually applied to a purely rational correspondence between certain features of reality and certain mental constructions; while we are here interested in the relationship between the totality of reality and the total person—his consciousness, mind, heart, and will.

It may seem at first that this is too broad and sweeping—that certain interactions with reality have no moral implication whatsoever. This narrow view that ethics and morality are limited only to certain very specific areas of human life has been at the root of much human misery throughout history. We will see that, on the contrary, human beings are value makers and value choosers, and that questions of value and ethics are, to a greater or lesser extent, relevant to all our experiences and interactions.

Of course, it is certainly true that not all of our interactions involve the same degree of moral relevance. There is a hierarchy of ethical considerations that reflects precisely the objective,

⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 178.

⁵ See the discussion of these points in *Gleanings*, and in Shoghi Effendi, *The Dispensation of Baha’u’lláh*.

intrinsic value relation. Thus, when we interact primarily with existents of lesser value, for example rocks or minerals, this certainly has less moral implications than when we interact with more refined entities, such as other humans.

Indeed, since the human being is the supreme value in creation, it is our interactions with other humans (and with God, of course) that have the greatest degree of moral implication. So much is this so, that we can say that the most specific goal of morality is to establish authentic relationships with other human beings. We thus have the general or overall moral purpose of establishing authentic relationships with each category of existence, and the specific or particular goal of establish such relations with other human beings.

The mark of authenticity in interhuman relationships the presence of self-sacrificing love or *altruism*. Non-authentic relationships are based on various forms of egotism and self-interest, and are characterized by conflict, disharmony, manipulation, cruelty, jealousy, and the like.

Altruistic love is not just a feeling of emotional warmth to wards others, but an objective, attractive force that operates according to certain objective laws and principles. Moral education means learning these laws and principles so that we become ever more subject to the force of love in our lives. Morality, then, is the *pursuit of authentic relationships* or, stated more fully, *the process of developing our innate capacity to sustain authentic relationships*.

Let us illustrate with a simple analogy from physics. Current physical theory has discovered four fundamental forces. The force of gravity and the strong nuclear force (which binds together the heavy particles of the atomic nucleus) are purely attractive. However, the weak nuclear force (which causes radioactive disintegration) is a purely repulsive force: it has no (currently known) attractive form. Finally, electro-magnetic force has both an attractive and a repulsive form. Now, the Bahá'í Writings affirm that altruistic love, like gravity, is a purely attractive force. Altruistic or authentic love cannot be the cause of conflict or estrangement between two people any more than the force of gravitational attraction between two physical bodies can push them apart.

Of course, physical bodies can be pulled apart by forces that overcome their mutual gravitational attraction. But, whenever we observe two physical bodies moving away from each other, we know that such a configuration is occurring in spite of their mutual gravitational attraction, not because of it. In the same way, whenever we see conflict and disharmony in human relationships, we know that this is due to some factor other than love, because love cannot produce estrangement. The very essence or nature of love makes it a purely attractive force.

Thus, moral development is the pursuit of relational authenticity by learning the laws that govern the action of love and then implementing this knowledge in our relationships with others. The moral person is one who has acquired the capacity for genuine love and self-sacrifice. He demonstrates this by his integrity and trust worthiness in his relations with others, by consistently treating others with genuine kindness and encouragement, by serving them and preferring their needs to his own.

In other words, the basics of morality are stark in their simplicity: either a person has acquired the capacity for self-sacrifice, which he demonstrates through active, humble, reliable service towards others, or he has not, in which case his behavior will reflect various pathologies of inauthenticity, some of which we mentioned above (e.g., greed, untrustworthiness, jealousy, self-centeredness, coldness, indifference, anger, or cruelty). It is through our actions—which reflect what we *are*—that our degree of moral development is proved out. If our actions consistently

betray selfish motives, then we can not claim that, underneath it all, we are really loving people in spite of our contrary behavior, any more than we can claim that the earth's gravity is somehow pushing airplanes into the sky.

This stark simplicity of basic morality is, of course, a challenge to every human being. To evaluate ourselves according to these criteria leads us all to painful self-revelations. Nevertheless, such self-revelations constitute the necessary first step towards authentic spirituality, and they also test the sincerity of our desire to achieve relational authenticity. The degree to which we humans have generally failed this test is reflected in a number of strategies we have devised throughout our history to transform basic morality into something else that can be more easily achieved. We now examine a few of these alternative conceptions of religion and morality.

3. Religion Viewed as Ideology

Perhaps the most pervasive alternative conception sees religion primarily as the belief in and defense of certain doctrines rather than the establishment of authentic relationships with God and others. These doctrines are viewed as the supreme value in creation, and morality is conceived as their propagation and dissemination by all possible means.

Of course, any religion presents a philosophy of life and thus teaches belief in certain doctrines and ideas. However, authentic religion considers true belief not as an end in itself but as one of the means of developing the capacity for authentic relationships. Thus, the error of ideologized religion lies not in seeking to propagate certain doctrines which it considers true, but rather in exalting these cherished doctrines above authentic relationships, thereby interchanging means and ends.

We will use the term *ideology* to designate any philosophy which holds that certain doctrines, ideas, or propositions are more important than human beings. Thus defined, any ideology (irrespective of what its specific doctrinal content may be) contradicts the basic assumption of authentic religion, which holds that the human being is the supreme value in creation. Since any moral system holds that lesser values may be sacrificed to obtain greater values, an ideology thus sanctions (at least implicitly) the deliberate sacrifice of human beings or of authentic human relationships if it is deemed necessary for the propagation of the doctrines of that ideology.

In regarding its doctrines as more important than human beings, an ideology considers these doctrines as God—as the supreme value in existence. Ideology is thus idolatry. It is the worship of certain ideas instead of the worship of God. The idolatrous nature of ideology is particularly evident in the case of certain gross political ideologies such as communism or fascism. However, religious ideologies are much more problematic since they idolatry certain specifically religious beliefs and thus become tempting alternatives to the pursuit of relational authenticity.

The history of Christianity provides an instructive, and indeed sobering, example of the transformation of authentic religion into an ideology. Jesus Christ taught that the establishment of relational authenticity was the central purpose and true meaning of life. He said that the central commandment of religion was to love God with all one's heart and to love one's neighbor as oneself. He taught that we should love even our enemies and those who seek to harm us (after all, even a morally undeveloped person—a thief or a murderer—is capable of loving his friends). He dramatized this conception through parables and narratives in which He instructed us to “turn

the other cheek” when aggressed, to “go the second mile” in deliberate self-sacrifice when forced to serve others.

Nowhere in the entire New Testament does Jesus give any doctrinal criterion of believership. Rather, He says that His true followers will be known by the fact that they “love one another; as I have loved you.”⁶

The early Christian believers appear to have clearly understood the nature of true religion and to have responded positively to the challenge of pursuing relational authenticity. This is reflected in the courageous way they endured three centuries of persecution and martyrdom. Let us recall that, during this period of persecution, no social or material advantage accrued to the followers of Christ. They suffered all these persecutions uniquely for the sake of entering into relational authenticity with others. Such is the attractive power of altruistic love.

Yet, beginning with the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D.⁷ the Christian Faith was gradually transformed into an ideology in which certain doctrines about the nature of Christ (so-called Christological doctrines) replaced relational authenticity as the mark of true believership. Historians tell us that, in the end, more Christians were killed by fellow Christians as a result of ideological disputes than all of the Christians killed by the Roman state during the entire period of persecution.

The ideologization of Christianity culminated in the Inquisition in which thousands upon thousands of Christian believers were put to death in the name of Jesus because they were held to deviate in some way from officially established ideology. The propagation of these doctrines was held to be more important than human beings and so human beings were sacrificed for the preservation of the doctrines. Even in the present day, it is belief in these doctrines, in some form or other, which is generally held to determine whether or not one is a true Christian. [Depending on which one of the 23,000 denominations or sects a person subscribes to, doctrines will vary. Some sects may even exclude other sects from the classification of “true Christian,” based on doctrine.]

Christianity is now the most numerous of all the major religions in the world, and we have no trouble accepting that every professed Christian truly believes in and adheres to the fundamental, established doctrines that have come to characterize Christianity (e.g., the Divinity and Sonship of Christ, His birth by a Virgin, His resurrection from the dead). But do we dare consider how many of these same believers would pass Jesus’ test of believership “that ye love one another; as I have loved you.”⁸ Indeed, if such were the case, the whole world would be a veritable paradise of love and authenticity, given the presence of great numbers of Christian believers in every part of the globe.

⁶ The Holy Bible, John 13:34.

⁷ In 315 A.D., Constantine became the first Christian Emperor of the Roman Empire. After realizing the extent to which the still young Christian community was riven by theological and doctrinal differences, he ordered the first ecumenical council to be held in Nicea in the year 325 A.D. The primary issue was the metaphysical nature of Christ— whether He was identical to God or only of like nature to God. The council at Nicea voted by majority (but not unanimously) that Christ was identical to God, thus giving one precise form to the doctrine of the Trinity. This conception was then formalized in the Nicene Creed, which became the first official statement of orthodox Christian belief. However, debate on these and other theological questions continued unabated, leading to bitter antagonisms and even the spilling of Christian blood by Christians.

⁸ The Holy Bible, John 13:34.

Of course, Christianity is far from the only example of the transmutation of true religion into an ideology. Indeed, militant and fundamentalist ideology seems to have become predominant within many of the world's major religions in these closing years of the twentieth century. However, the example of Christianity is particularly instructive because the teachings of Jesus so clearly and consistently stressed altruistic love above all other considerations. Indeed, if we human beings can murder fellow believers in the name of a religion whose avowed fundamental precept is love, then we must accept that we all have within us the potential to conceive of an appropriate ideological rationalization for any cruelty whatsoever. It is the realization of this potential of our nature that should motivate us to vigilance against the ideologization of religion.

In His writings, Bahá'u'lláh consistently cautions us against such ideologization of religion:

*Oh ye that dwell on earth! The religion of God is for love and unity; make it not the cause of enmity or dissension.*⁹

*The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause dissension and strife.*¹⁰

In a similar vein, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (the eldest Son of Bahá'u'lláh and designated Interpreter of His Teachings) has said:

*And among the teachings of Baha'u'llah is that religion must be the cause of fellowship and love. If it becomes the cause of estrangement then it is not needed, for religion is like a remedy; if it aggravates the disease then it becomes unnecessary.*¹¹

*The third teaching of Bahá'u'llah is that religion must be the source of fellowship, the cause of unity and the nearness of God to man. If it rouses hatred and strife, it is evident that absence of religion is preferable and an irreligious man better than one who professes it. According to the divine Will and intention religion should be the cause of love and agreement, a bond to unify all mankind for it is a message of peace and goodwill to man from God.*¹²

As is clear from these statements of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and as we have already mentioned above, to say that authentic religion is not an ideology is not to say that authentic religion does not involve assent to and affirmation of certain propositions, principles, and doctrines. What it does mean is that all such doctrines should serve the moral and spiritual advancement of human beings and not that human beings, or authentic human relations, should be sacrificed for the imposition or propagation of these doctrines. Shoghi Effendi has expressed this truth as follows:

If long-cherished ideals and time-honored institutions, if certain social assumptions and religious formulae have ceased to promote the welfare of the generality of mankind, if they no longer minister to the needs of a continually evolving humanity, let them be swept away and relegated to the limbo of obsolescent and forgotten doctrines. . . . For legal standards, political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests

⁹ Tablets to Baha'u'llah, p. 220.

¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 129.

¹¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 29.

¹² 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.

*of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.*¹³

Ideologization is perhaps the most prevalent but unfortunately not the only distortion of authentic religion.

4. Religion Viewed as Social Convention

The presence of culture-bound elements in each of the traditional religions has led some to conclude that religion is wholly a product of culture and thus that cultural values are the only ultimate values. Many philosophical materialists add to this conception the further belief that culture itself is nothing more than the straightforward result of spontaneous interactions between a human collectivity and its immediate environment. In this view, cultural values are accidental and local rather than intrinsic and universal.

Revealed (prophetic) religion views the connection between religion and culture in exactly the opposite manner: since God is the supreme value, He is the ultimate source of all positive values, cultural or otherwise. These values are injected into human society through the revelations of the Manifestations, who represent the link (religia) between God and humanity. These values are partly universal and intrinsic, and partly local and extrinsic. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

*There can be no doubt whatever that the peoples of the world, of whatever race or religion, derive their inspiration from one heavenly Source, and are the subjects of one God. The difference between the ordinances under which they abide should be attributed to the varying requirements and exigencies of the age in which they were revealed. All of them, except a few which are the outcome of human perversity, were ordained of God, and are a reflection of His Will and Purpose.*¹⁴

*These principles and laws [of revealed religion], these firmly-established and mighty systems, have proceeded from one Source, and are the rays of one Light. That they differ one from another is to be attributed to the varying requirements of the ages in which they were promulgated.*¹⁵

As is further explained by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the intrinsic and universal values are based on the universal nature of the human being as created and determined by God. Because there is a universal human nature, the laws, principles, and values deriving from this universal configuration are transcultural. They are thus more ultimate than any strictly cultural value. However, certain extrinsic, temporary, and local principles can serve as ancillary values to the universal ones.

The divine religions embody two kinds of ordinances. First there are those which constitute essential, or spiritual, teachings of the Word of God. These are faith in God, the acquirement of the virtues which characterize perfect manhood, praise worthy moralities, the acquisition of the bestowals and bounties emanating from the divine effulgences—in brief, the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics. . . . This is the essential foundation of all the divine religions, the reality itself common to all....

¹³ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'lláh*, p. 42.

¹⁴ Baha'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 217.

¹⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 287--288.

*Second, there are laws and ordinances which are temporary and nonessential. These concern human transactions and relations. They are accidental and subject to change according to the exigencies of time and place. These ordinances are neither permanent nor fundamental.*¹⁶

In sum, although there is a reciprocal relationship between culture and revealed religion, fundamentally it is revelation that produces culture and not the converse. The values taught by the Manifestations are mostly universal and transcultural, but are also partly local and culturally relative.

What empirical evidence is there to support the thesis that there is a universal, transcultural dimension to human nature? Quite a lot, as it turns out. If you put honey or sugar to the lips of a newly-born infant, he will respond positively and smack his lips. If you put a bitter substance such as quinine to his lips, he will recoil in evident avoidance. This response is innate and universal, and it represents that fact that there are certain stimuli to which all normally endowed humans respond positively and other stimuli to which all respond negatively. In other words, the human being has from the beginning of his life a definite internal structure, inherent in his nature, that he brings to all his encounters with reality.

This is not to deny that there are individual differences in value preferences, and that these differences are both learned and innate. The point is that the similarities between human responses to given stimuli are more important and more pervasive than the differences. All humans respond positively to love and kindness and respond negatively, by avoidance or aggression, to cruelty and pain. The fact that various cultures and peoples have found different ways of expressing both the positive value of love and the negative value of cruelty does not diminish the universality of these values themselves (whether positive or negative).

Thus authentic morality is based on the perception and knowledge of what is universal and intrinsic in human nature, and is thus transcultural, whereas culture-based moralities incorporate many arbitrary, purely subjective value preferences of particular groups or individuals.

5. Religion as a Set of Moral Rules

Yet another conception of religion is the notion that spirituality consists solely or primarily in following a set of rules for moral behavior. Of course, authentic religion has laws, precepts, duties, behavioral principles, and ethical norms, but regards these as means and not ends in themselves. Bahá'u'lláh has given a succinct but powerful statement of this truth:

*Whatever duty Thou has prescribed unto Thy servants of extolling to the utmost Thy majesty and glory is but a token of Thy grace unto them, that they may be enabled to ascend unto the station conferred upon their own inmost being, the station of the knowledge of their own selves.*¹⁷

Legalism is the name usually given to the view which holds that religion can be reduced to a set of moral regulations. Legalism considers certain rules, and obedience to them, as the supreme value in creation in a similar manner that ideology considers belief in certain doctrines the supreme value. Relational authenticity involves the whole person, his mind, his heart and his

¹⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bthá, *Promulgation*, pp. 403—404.

¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, pp. 4—5.

will. It involves right understanding or thought, right feeling or motivation (altruistic love), and right action or justice. Legalism focuses on the observable action and neglects or diminishes the requirement of altruistic motivation. It therefore leads to hypocrisy (insincerity) because it allows a person to claim that he is authentically spiritual if he accomplishes acts in conformity with ethical norms, even if his inner motivation is purely selfish and even aggressively cruel. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláha warns us against such presumptuous hypocrisy:

*Make not your deeds as snares wherewith to entrap the object of your aspiration, and deprive not yourselves of this Ultimate Objective for which have ever yearned all such as have drawn nigh unto God. Say: The very life of all deeds is My good pleasure, and all things depend upon Mine acceptance.*¹⁸

The New Testament records that Jesus Christ persistently denounced the legalism of the Pharasaic Jews as a major distortion of authentic religion, just as the Qur'an of Muhammad denounces the idolatrous nature of certain Christological doctrines as an "adding [of] gods to God."¹⁹ Moreover, just as the ideologization of religion serves to replace relational authenticity by the more easily achievable goal of passive belief, so legalism accomplishes a similar shift of focus: it allows the individual to avoid facing the most basic issue involved in the struggle to achieve relational authenticity—the question of purity of motive.

Shoghi Effendi has also stressed the importance of a pure and heartfelt motivation for the achievement of authenticity in our relationship with God:

*the core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites man with God. . . . The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character.*²⁰

The primacy and universality of love as the basis for authentic spirituality is affirmed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the following passage:

*Know thou of a certainty that Love is the secret of God's holy Dispensation, the manifestation of the All-Merciful, the fountain of spiritual outpourings. Love is heaven's kindly light, the Holy Spirit's eternal breath that vivifieth the human soul. Love is the cause of God's revelation unto man, the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things. Love is the one means that ensureth true felicity both in this world and the next. Love is the light that guideth in darkness, the living link that uniteth God with man, that assureth the progress of every illumined soul. Love is the most great law that ruleth this mighty and heavenly cycle. . . . Love revealeth with unfailing and limitless power the mysteries latent in the universe.*²¹

In spite of these strong statements, there is nevertheless a tendency for us to fall into legalism, especially when it comes to moral education. This is partly because ethical norms are more objective and thus relatively easy to teach, at least on a superficial level. However, it is also because, for the most part, we have not yet learned how to teach authentic spirituality in its full dimension; the teaching of moral rules is thus seen as the best available substitute.

6. Romanticism in Religion

¹⁸ 18. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, ¶36.

¹⁹ See The Qur'an, verse 28:87; also 5:76—77.

²⁰ Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *Spiritual Foundations: Prayer, Meditation, and the Devotional Attitude*, p. 14.

²¹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 12.1

Ideologization and legalism represent a relative overvaluation of certain ideas and certain actions respectively. A similar overvaluation of the subjective feelings commonly experienced in altruistic love represents yet another deviation from authenticity.

Romanticism holds that the subjective feeling of euphoria and joy which accompanies altruistic love is the highest value in creation. This is perhaps the most subtle of the classical idolatries, because it can occur only when someone has already begun to develop his capacity for authenticity. It thus becomes a seductive alternative to the continued pursuit of relational authenticity, a pursuit that may always be satisfying but not always easy or pleasant.

Ideologization and legalism each make one of the means of attaining authenticity into the end, whereas romanticism takes a by-product or consequence of authenticity to be authenticity itself. Since the presence of altruistic love is the mark of relational authenticity, feelings of joy and exaltation are always present in an authentic relation. It thus becomes very easy, especially at first, to mistake these feelings of love for the love itself. One then begins to pursue the feelings for their own sake and gradually to sacrifice authenticity in the process. This is the classic “falling in love with love,” but in the religious context.

The crudest but clearest example of this process is drug addiction in which one provokes temporary feelings of euphoria and well being by artificially stimulating those areas of the brain and nervous system involved in the experience of these emotions. But, generally speaking, romantic subversion of authenticity is far more subtle; romanticism is a powerful generator of subtle illusions.

The whole history of mysticism is tinged with romantic elements, but the culmination of the romantic approach to authenticity was probably Persian Sufism. Sufi mystics held that the only mark of authenticity was a romantic euphoria called “love madness” in which one totally abandons the mind and the will to overpowering feelings of spiritual joy and euphoria.

In such works as *The Seven Valleys*, Baha’u’llah affirms the validity of the euphoria and joy brought by love, and He never seems to challenge romanticism in as direct a manner as He does ideologization and legalism. However, He strongly relativizes the euphoric element, making it only an early stage in the process of attaining authenticity (*The Valley of Love*), and He does explicitly identify one of the Sufi excesses, namely their particular view that the individual human self can ultimately fuse with or be absorbed into the divine essence. Indeed, Bahá’u’llah characterizes the exponents of this quasipanteistic view as those who have declared themselves partners with God.²²

It would thus seem that religious or mystic romanticism tends towards an unacceptable blurring of the legitimate boundaries of the self, leading perhaps either to manic self-exaltation or to an unhealthy preoccupation with oneself to the exclusion of others. One mistakes the self’s absorption in itself for union with God. Baha’u’llah alludes to the non-authentic character of this condition of spiritual self-absorption in such passages as the following:

*They that are the worshipers of the idol which their imaginations have carved, and who call it Inner Reality, such men are in truth accounted among the heathen.*²³

²² See the many references to this notion in, for example, Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*.

²³ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings*, p. 338.

*And among the people is he who layeth claim to inner knowledge, and still deeper knowledge concealed within this knowledge. Say: Thou speakest false! By God! What thou dost possess is naught but husks which We have left to thee as bones are left to dogs.*²⁴

In any case, those who have experienced the pangs and throes of romantic love know that it indeed “burneth to ashes the harvest of reason”²⁵ and destroys or limits one’s ability to function authentically.

We thus see that each of the three fundamental human capacities of mind, will, and heart can give rise, if isolated from the others and taken to an extreme, to a distortion that is destructive of authenticity. Ideology, legalism, and romanticism show us that even God-given, spiritual capacities can be misused in a sincere attempt to achieve the capacity for relational authenticity. This should lead us to realize just how subtle the process of true moral development can be.

7. Humanisms and Non-Religious Ideologies

Besides the religiously based moralities, there are non-religious or a-religious moralities that attempt to elaborate a coherent moral system without reference to intrinsic and universal values. Such systems may well be humanistic in the narrow sense that they give supreme value to one or another aspect of the human being, but they are inauthentic in that they provide no basis for distinguishing that which is universal and essential in human nature from what is purely local and accidental. Examples of such inauthentic humanisms are theories of racial superiority, which hold that the particular characteristics of some racial group are supreme over other human values; or various forms of militarism, which hold that the physically powerful have a natural right to dominate the weak.

Indeed, agnostic or atheistic humanisms may well hold that the human being is the highest value in existence (not just in creation, since God’s existence is now discounted), but yet lack the notion of a universal intrinsic value inherent in the very being (essence) of each individual human. For example, collectivism is a humanism which holds that all human value resides in the collectivity: the individual derives all of his value from society and the role he plays in the social context. From a purely collectivist viewpoint the individual, considered in isolation from society, is literally without value (because now there is no notion of intrinsic value). Nor is collectivist value universal, since it is usually defined with reference to some particular collectivity.

Nonideologized communism, and its variants, represent a collectivist humanism, in which “the proletariat” or “the people” play essentially the same role as does God for authentic religion.

Yet another humanist morality is individualism, which holds that an individual may have value, but only insofar as he has demonstrated some special abilities or competency above the socially perceived norm or average. Individualistic value is thus particular to each person. It is also extrinsic because it is defined with respect to the norms of the given society. Hence, it is neither universal nor intrinsic.

Thus, authentic morality is based on what is universal and intrinsic in essential human nature. If we negate intrinsically, we get systems like collectivism where all value is extrinsic to the individual. If we negate universality, then we get a system such as individualism, which gives

²⁴ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, ¶36.

²⁵ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, p. 8.

value only or primarily to certain particular characteristics possessed by some individuals, but not shared by all humans.

Besides the humanistic moralities, there are also those based on various non-religious, social, or political ideologies. We will not engage a detailed discussion of such moralities here, especially as we have already treated thoroughly the case of religious ideologies (see section 3, p. 8 ff.). Suffice it to say that social or political ideologies share with religious ideologies the defect of exalting some doctrine or principle above the human being and thus of giving moral justification to the sacrifice of humans or authentic human relations for the propagation of the ideology.

However, the defects of purely humanistic moralities, such as collectivism and individualism, are perhaps more subtle than the defects of ideological moralities. We therefore devote the next two sections to a closer examination of them.

They are: (...to be continued)

8. Collectivism: the Pursuit of Power

9. Individualism and Competition . . .

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