

The Concept of Sin in the Baha'i Faith

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“...It is certainly the case that sins are a potent cause of physical ailments. If humankind were free from the defilements of sin and waywardness, and lived according to a natural, inborn equilibrium, without following wherever their passions led, it is undeniable that diseases would no longer take the ascendant, nor diversify with such intensity.”¹

— ‘Abdu’l-Baha

In understanding the concept of sin in the Bahā’i’s Faith it seems appropriate to place the subject in context of good and evil. Bahā’i’s do not believe in the existence of evil as a separate entity. Likewise, sin is to be viewed in the light of the absence of holiness. In many of the religious scriptures evil or sin has been personified as the Devil or Satan, but Bahā’i’s believe that these words are used simply as symbols. Bahā’i writings state: “Man has the power both to do good and to do evil; if his power for good predominates and his inclinations to do wrong are conquered, then man in truth may be called a saint. But if, on the contrary, he rejects the things of God and allows his evil passions to conquer him, then, he is no better than a mere animal. Saints are men who have freed themselves from the world of matter and who have overcome sin. They live in the world but are not of it, their thoughts being continually in the world of the spirit. Their lives are spent in holiness, and their deeds show forth love, justice and godliness. They are illumined from on high; they are as bright and shining lamps in the dark places of the earth.”²

In many religions, there are many acts of piety and of prayer or worship prescribed to the followers to address the failings, shortcomings and sinful acts of mortal humans. Even though we can dismiss the simplification of naming action (or objects) as being either ‘good’ or ‘bad’, we cannot dismiss the West’s preoccupation with its simplistic concept of good and evil. Evil or sin, as an omnipotent, omnipresent force, found its way into Western Judeo-Christian civilization by way of Zoroastrianism, a major religion at least three thousands years old. Zarathustra described the forces at work within the universe and within man as being one and the same, possessing both a positive and a negative side. He personified these forces, as agents of light and darkness responsible for good and evil, so that His followers who were unlettered, untutored, and mostly simple, peace-loving agriculturists would more easily understand them. Being worshippers of nature, they were also superstitious and spiritually unsophisticated. Zarathustra’s elevated concept of the universal unity of opposites would have been difficult to comprehend without the aid of simple stories describing metaphorically the relationships between humankind and God.

Ahura Mazda, Zarathustra's name for God, was never two gods; He was always one. Ahriman personified the opposing force in the universe, as necessary as destruction is to construction, as darkness is to light, as death is to life. This 'opposing force' could be used to explain animistic spirits as well as man's cruel behaviour - in short, all those things people feared and called evil. Zarathustra's followers could live accordance with this explanation, trying to do and to be better, because Zarathustra taught that the force of darkness or evil could be battled and overcome, just as God always overcame it at the end of His cycles. This personified force became the West's Satan, the devil, and all the other names we have borrowed or invented that have come to us through Judaism, Christianity, Islam and a host of other lesser Near Eastern religions. In the Bahā'ī religion, the word 'Satan' is occasionally used to refer to anything that people call evil.

We, therefore, see how easily a sophisticated explanation of man's baser nature as being a natural expression of negative forces at work everywhere in the universe could become subverted and misunderstood and at last over-simplified by those who were raised, not by thought, by superstition and magic. Such ideas of good and evil still abound throughout our world in people still shackled by these same primitive misconceptions.

It is not a new idea that the Bahā'ī teachings offer on the non-existence of evil; it is the explanation of the idea that is new. 'Abdu'l-Baha considers this question in two parts: things that exist as materials objects and those that have an intellectual reality. He says: "Intellectual things are those which have no outward existence but are conceptions of the mind. For example, mind itself is an intellectual thing that has no outward existence. All man's characteristics and qualities form an intellectual existence and are not sensible. Briefly, the intellectual realities, such as all the qualities and admirable perfections of man, are purely good, and exist. Evil is simply their non-existence. So ignorance is the want of knowledge; error is the want of guidance; forgetfulness is the want of memory; stupidity is the want of good sense. All these things have no real existence. In the same way, the sensible realities are absolutely good, and evil is due to their non-existence—that is to say, blindness is the want of sight, deafness is the want of hearing, poverty is the want of wealth, illness is the want of health, death is the want of life, and weakness is the want of strength."³ He is not saying that absence-of conditions do not exist but only that they exist by default. We do not say, for example, wealth is the want of poverty, sight is the want of blindness, etc. The true reality is the positive condition and its opposite can only be defined in terms of the 'real' condition. Put another way, the negative is defined in terms of what the positive is not. Light is not defined by darkness, but darkness is defined as the absence of light. One is the negation of the other; its non-existence is for definitional purposes only. We would not tell a person living in poverty that his poverty was non-existent; what is non-existent is his wealth. Because in this case wealth does not exist, the void or lack is filled by a word, 'poverty'. As a condition, it is very real.

An analogy is that of a tree that casts a shadow. The reality is the tree; the shadow can exist only so long as the tree exists—it exists by default. A Bahā'ī educator some years ago put this idea into a psychological framework, saying that 'every vice is the shadow of its virtue'. The Latin root for the word 'vice', in fact, means lack of, or deficiency.

Bahā'u'llāh, Founder-Prophet of the Bahā'ī Faith and 'Abdu'l-Baha, His appointed successor, have repeatedly stated that absolute perfection lies with God only. His universe has been perfectly fashioned and it sustains itself in perfect fashion. Everything in creation 'works' for its own benefit

as well as for the benefit of everything else. The interrelatedness and interconnectedness of all existence display this mutual reciprocity in ways science is only beginning to understand. Also, each level of reality functions perfectly; however, the individual components that inhabit each level do not. Nonetheless, every created has been given the means for reaching its own innate degree of perfection. This possibility is itself a perfect way for the Creator to define His relationship to His creation. Because perfection in the relative world exists as a potentiality, its attainment is possible only over a long passage of time with great effort and with the right conditions. This idea also tells us that perfection is the positive quality or state and that imperfection is its lack. 'Abdu'l-Baha defined evil as imperfection. In between perfection and imperfection (good and evil), of course, are many degrees.

Bahā'u'llāh wrote that nothing that we call evil ever came directly from God, the Creator, but that 'every evil thing is from yourselves'. 'Evil' actions arise from the misuse of positive or 'good' behaviour to re-emerge in the negative range as willful, destructive behaviour. The practitioner of evil has written a new script for himself in order to justify the bizarre reality his distorted imagination has invented. The lack of good actions is filled, not by a negative evil force, but by the negative behavioural responses that he has chosen.

A passage describing the dysfunctional nature of evil written by the Bahā'i scholar J. E. Esslemont is quoted here to help clarify the Bahā'i position. "According to the Bahā'i philosophy it follows from the doctrine of the unity of God that there can be no such things as positive evil. There can only be One Infinite. If there were any other power in the universe outside of or opposed to the One, then the One would not be Infinite. In the realm of created things, however, there is variety - variety of light and shade, of colour, of consistence, of taste, of smell. Among human beings there is variety of physical strength, of health, of intelligence, of courage, of every possible faculty and attribute. With regard to every one of these qualities however the differences among different people are differences of degree, not of essenceA bad man is a man with the higher side of his nature still underdeveloped. If we are selfish, the evil is not in our love of self-all love, even self love, is good, is divine. The evil is that we have such a poor, inadequate, misguided love of self and such a lack of love for others and for God. We look upon our self as only a superior sort of animal and foolishly pamper our lower nature as we might pamper a pet dog - with worse results in our own case than in that of the dog. We may be brilliantly intellectual with regard to material things but we are blind to the things of the spirit and lacking in the higher and nobler part of life. Evil is lack of life. If the lower side of man's nature is disproportionately developed, the remedy is not less life for that side, but more life for the higher side, so that the balance may be restored. 'I am come,' said Christ, 'that ye may have life and that ye may have it more abundantly.' That is what we all need - live, more life, the life that is life indeed!"⁴

It is for this and some other reasons that Bahā'u'llāh prohibits confession to, and seeking absolution of one's sins from, a human being. Instead one should beg forgiveness from God. In the Tablet of Bisharat, He states that "such confession before people results in one's humiliation and abasement", and He affirms that God "wisheth not the humiliation of His servants." Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahā'i Faith, set the prohibition into context in a letter written by his secretary to an individual Bahā'i: "We are forbidden to confess to any person, as do the Catholics to their priests, our sins and shortcomings, or to do so in public, as some religious sects. However, if we spontaneously

desire to acknowledge we have been wrong in something, or that we have some fault of character, and ask another person's forgiveness or pardon, we are quite free to do so."⁵ The Universal House of Justice, the supreme governing council of the Bahā'i Community has also clarified that Bahā'u'llāh's prohibition concerning the confession of sins does not prevent an individual from admitting transgressions in the course of consultations held under the aegis of Bahā'i institutions. Likewise, it does not preclude the possibility of seeking advice from a close friend or of a professional counsellor regarding such matters.

To once more draw from the Bahā'i writings let us look at the concept of the relationship between good and evil in human beings. "In creation there is no evil, all is good. Certain qualities and natures innate in some men and apparently blameworthy are not so in reality. For example, from the beginning of his life you can see in a nursing child the signs of greed, of anger, and of temper. Then, it may be said, good and evil are innate in the reality of man, and this is contrary to the pure goodness of nature and creation. The answer to this is that greed, which is to ask for something more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is used suitably. So, if a man is greedy to acquire science and knowledge, or to become compassionate, generous, and just, it is most praiseworthy. If he exercises his anger and wrath against bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, it is very praiseworthy; but if he does not use these qualities in a right way, they are blameworthy.... It is that same with all the natural qualities of man, which constitute the capital of life; if they be used and displayed in an unlawful way, they become blameworthy. Therefore, it is clear that creation is purely good."⁶

The Bahā'i Faith does not therefore accept the concept of 'original sin' or any related doctrine that considers that people are basically evil or have intrinsically evil elements in their nature. All the forces and faculties within us are God-given and thus potentially beneficial to our spiritual development. However, if a person, through his own God-given free will, turns away from this force or fails to make the necessary effort to develop his spiritual capacities, the result is imperfection. Both within the individual and in society, there will be what one might term 'dark spots'. These dark spots are imperfections and 'Abdu'l-Baha has said that 'evil is imperfection'. If a tiger kills and eats another animal, this is not evil, because it is an expression of the tiger's natural instinct for survival. But if a person kills and eats a fellow human being, this same act may be considered evil because man is capable of doing otherwise. Such an act is not an expression of his true nature.

As relatively undeveloped creatures, we have certain intrinsic needs that demand satisfaction. These needs are partly physical and tangible and partly spiritual and intangible. It is God who has created us in this manner and placed us in this situation. Because God truly loves us, He has provided for the legitimate satisfaction of all our needs. But if, whether through simple ignorance or willful rebellion, we try to satisfy some of our needs in an illegitimate or unhealthy way, then we may distort our true nature and generate within ourselves new appetites incapable of genuine satisfaction. Here is the Bahā'i explanation: "...capacity is of two kinds: natural capacity and acquired capacity. The first, which is the creation of God, is purely good-in the creation of God there is no evil; but the acquired capacity has become the cause of the appearance of evil. For example, God has created all men in such a manner and has given them such a constitution and such capacities that they are benefited by sugar and honey and harmed and destroyed by poison. This nature and constitution is innate, and God has given it equally to all mankind. But man begins little by little to accustom

himself to poison by taking a small quantity each day, and gradually increasing it, until he reaches such a point that he cannot live without a gram of opium every day. The natural capacities are thus completely perverted. Observe how much the natural capacity and constitution can be changed, until by different habits and training they become entirely perverted. One does not criticize vicious people because of their innate capacities and nature, but rather for their acquired capacities and nature.”⁷

Bahā'u'llāh said that pride, or self-centeredness, is one of the greatest hindrances to spiritual progress. Pride represents an exaggerated sense of one's own importance in the universe and leads to an attitude of superiority over others. The prideful person feels as though he is or ought to be in absolute control of his life and the circumstances surrounding it, and he seeks power and dominance over others because such power helps him maintain this illusion of superiority. Thus, pride is such a hindrance to spiritual growth because it impels the prideful individual on an endless quest to fulfill the expectations of his vainly conceived and illusory self-concept.

In other words, the key understanding Baha'i morality and ethics is to be found in the Bahā'i notion of spiritual progress that which is conducive to spiritual progress is good, and whatever tends to hinder spiritual progress is bad. Thus, from the Bahā'i viewpoint, learning 'good' from 'bad' (or 'right' from 'wrong') means attaining a degree of self-knowledge that permits us to know when something is helpful to our spiritual growth and when it is not.⁸ And this knowledge can only be obtained through the teachings of the God's Intermediaries.

Bahā'u'llāh repeatedly stressed that only revealed religion can save us from our imperfections. It is because God has sent his Intermediaries to show us the path to spiritual development and to touch our hearts with the spirit of God's love that we are able to realize our true potential and make the effort to be united with God. This is the 'salvation' that religion brings. It does not save us from the stain of some 'original sin', nor does it protect us from some external evil force or devil. Rather, it delivers us from captivity to our own lower nature, a captivity that breeds private despair and threatens social destruction, and it shows us the path to a deep and satisfying happiness.

Indeed, the essential reason for such widespread unhappiness and terrible social conflict and crises in the world today is that humankind has turned away from true religion and spiritual principles. The only salvation in any age, Bahā'is believe, is to turn again towards God, to accept His Intermediary for that day, and to follow His teachings. Bahā'u'llāh pointed that, if we reflect deeply on the conditions of our existence, we must eventually realize and admit to ourselves that, in absolute terms, we possess nothing. Everything we are or have—our physical body and our rational soul—all comes from Creator. Since God has freely given us so much, we have, in turn an obligation to God. Bahā'u'llāh stated that man has two basic duties towards God: “The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation [i.e. the Intermediary].... It behooveth every one who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other.”⁹

In the light foregoing explanations on the Bahā'i concept of sin, of good and evil, there are various ways of classifying the actions of the lower nature of the human being: sins of the mind, of the mouth, and of the body. Most religions group the variety of evil deeds according to four

major sins: (a) sexual immorality, (b) murder, (c) stealing, and (d) lying. Crimes of the tongue may be further subdivided: lying and deliberate deception, hypocrisy-especially in matters of religion, slander and bearing false witness, and foul speech. But in the final analysis, the biblical battle of Armageddon or the Hindu idiom of the Mahabharata, turns out not to be a war fought between nations but a spiritual battle fought inside ourselves. It is not waiting to be fought; it is upon us every day of our lives.

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