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Search for Value:
Ethics in Bahá'í Thought

Edited

by

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Foreword

The essays in the present volume share a focus on the core values of the Bahá'í Faith, explaining ethics and ideas that have helped to create the Faith's distinctive vision. This volume contains revised versions of five outstanding works that previously appeared in the Bahá'í Studies Review plus two articles published for the first time.

A recurrent theme is how Bahá'í writings reaffirm, renew, and, yet frequently, re-interpret previous religious teachings. Bahá'í texts link the Faith's ethical values with those of the great religions of the past: Bahá'í ethics are based on teachings "revealed unto the Prophets of old", "described in all the heavenly books"; they are "the fundamental reality of the divine religions", "changeless and eternal." Yet, Udo Schaefer argues in "Towards a Bahá'í Ethics" that Bahá'í texts collectively provide a novel and coherent moral system, prioritizing certain values, such as justice, that are critical to the achievement of the Faith's central objective of social harmony. William Collins provides an example of this theme of pivotal renewal in "Bahá'í Family Life". The Bahá'í Faith, in common with several other religious traditions, commends married life, but Collins suggests that the application of Bahá'í values to the family situation (including elimination of domination based on gender, physical

strength, or earning power, and the legal notion of *mutatis mutandis* as an equalizing principle) yields an entirely fresh perspective.

A second idea cutting across these essays relates to the integration of spiritual values in various types of discourse. In “Discourses of Knowledge”, Franklin Lewis suggests that the ethical application of knowledge is likely to be the most distinctive Bahá’í contribution to methodology. He provides substantial evidence from Bahá’í texts to support the validity and desirability of adopting Western academic methods in the intellectual quest. Drawing on passages from Bahá’í scripture, Lewis argues that prioritizing rational and critical thinking, promoting an open spirit of inquiry, and an awareness of the ethical implications of knowledge are important elements of a culture of learning. According to John Hick, writing from the point of view of a Christian theologian in “Only One True Religion?”, the neglect of such reasonable attitudes can lead to outbursts of exclusivism, triumphalism, and fanaticism among religious people.

The final section of this volume focuses on three notable individuals, each of whom translated a distinctive vision of Bahá’í values into a path-breaking life. Alain Locke was one of the most outstanding intellectuals of his generation: the first ever African American Rhodes Scholar (the second did not follow until 1960, 53 years later); philosophical architect of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s; and father of the idea of multiculturalism. In “Alain Locke and Cultural Pluralism”, Christopher Buck uncovers archival material to provide the most extensive account so far of the impact of Locke’s Bahá’í identity on his philosophical ideas. He concludes that Locke’s fluid hierarchy of values (which included loyalty, tolerance, reciprocity, and cultural pluralism) had their foundations in the Bahá’í principle of unity in diversity.

The subjects of the two remaining essays - Jamal Effendi and Ibrahim Kheiralla - were, together with Martha Root, the most effective disseminators of Bahá’í teachings outside Iran during the Faith’s first century. In “Jamal Effendi and the Bahá’í Faith in South Asia”, Moojan Momen describes in fascinating detail the travels of the charismatic Jamal Effendi during the late 19th century, including accounts of his legendary resourcefulness, such as his intervention

to help curtail a smallpox epidemic in a remote Indonesian island. Despite problems later in his life, Ibrahim Kheiralla was extraordinarily successful in the late 19th century as the first Bahá'í teacher in the USA. In "Ibrahim Kheiralla and the Making of the American Bahá'í Community", Richard Hollinger argues that this success was partly due to Kheiralla's ability to "Americanize" his message, a process fashioned by local Bahá'ís. Although Jamal Effendi and Kheiralla faced different circumstances and used different approaches to spread Bahá'í teachings, we are led to conclude that the success of each was partly due to their abilities to appreciate local values and to correlate their teaching with elements of local popular culture.

Hence, the overall theme of this volume parallels an overarching Bahá'í idea: the need for the reinvigoration of individual and social life with ethical values, or, as stated in Bahá'í writings, to breathe "a new life into every human frame," and to instill "into every word a fresh potency."

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