The Human Spirit in Moral Education

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Abstract

As belief in traditional authorities in Europe has declined, morality and ethics have been constantly undermined. With the rise of modern science, there has been a progressive fragmentation in spiritual values. Moral education has been caught in between. In schools run by religious institutions, it is still a part of religious education, whereas in secular schools, it has become a distinct subject on character and behaviour, duty and obligation, devoid of any religious affinity. In search of what to teach in moral education, a mixture of ethics, religious festivities and cultural traditions, nation-building concepts, and other trivialities such as social etiquette, personal grooming and self-esteem have been included in the curriculum.

There is no lack of criticism in the US and Europe on the weakness of the secular models of moral education and there have been calls for "going back to basics" by the fundamentalists. From the Bahá'í point of view morality has assumed a new meaning and a new direction. It is no longer sufficient to be virtuous; one has to be conscious of the fact that the world has become one single state. To be moral implies going beyond being patriotic to one's country, race, culture and religion. One's allegiance must be to the whole of humankind.

The article examines briefly the historical perspective that has lead to the immanence of secular models of moral education in Europe and the US, how moral education has been taught in Singapore, some secular models from the US and their inadequacies, and what the Bahá'í Writings have to offer.

The Division: Religious and Secular Moral Education

The great progress of science and technology over the past few hundred years seems to have brought with it an equally momentous crisis of values. Ever since the 18th century European Enlightenment, the great rise of faith in science and reason has been shadowed by an equally sharp decline in the respect for moral authority. This process of secularization has been gathering pace in recent years. The Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, notes that:

"Ever since the youth and student revolts of the late 1960s, there are no longer any institutions or guardians of values which are not in crisis or have not been radically challenged. Where today is there any undisputed authority? We used to be told: the pope, the bishop, the church says; or the prime minister, the government, the party says; or the teacher, the professor, 'your father' says. Where nowadays could we even settle a discussion – let alone pacify a demonstration – with an appeal to such authorities? No; the state, church, courts, army, school, family – all seem to be insecure. They are no longer accepted without question – least of all by young people – as guardians of values."[1]

The crisis of values seems to be inseparable from the crisis of traditional religion. With the rise of Reason as an alternative to Faith, clearly articulated during the European Enlightenment period, many sought to found moral values on rational or empirical principles. This trend is clearly evident in the philosophy of Hobbes, Hume and the Utilitarians. The writer Udo Shaefer, summarizes the impact of these philosophies on European moral values over the last two hundred years in the following way:

"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, the Copernican revolution of thought, which began in the 17th century and molded 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.

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[1] Hans Kung. *Why I am still a Christian.* T and T Clark Ltd., Edinburgh, 1987, p3.

Reason claimed to be autonomous and set itself up as the unique court of appeal. 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 civilization... However, the spirit of modernism is also responsible for the deep crisis of faith and, in its wake, the crisis of morals."[2]

Moral Philosophy in the 1900's

The moral confusion of our times, the undermining of spiritual values, and particularly the decline in respect for moral authorities, has had a profound effect on the moral training of children. The distinct development of moral education in America since the 1960's has been towards a more open process of reasoning and reflecting, away from the authoritative "bag-of-virtues" approach. One of the models that was in use in the 60's in America is called "values clarification" developed by Carl Rogers(1965), Simon, Howe and Kirschenbaum (1972). Rogers had, in the 50's, developed techniques in counseling that were non-directive, non-judgmental, and client-centered and which became known as humanistic psychology. These techniques were then introduced to schools where students were treated as clients. Students were allowed to discover their own values as long as they were comfortable with what they chose. The emphasis is on skills and opportunities for the students to reflect on inputs and come up with their own thought-out answers. The aim was to help students identify their own values and those of others using both rational thinking and emotional awareness.

Another model was developed by Lawrence Kohlberg (1984). In this abstract-reflective approach, development of moral life results from making the right choice after considering the consequences. The students were urged to discuss the reasons for their value choices and to foster change in the stages of reasoning. A hypothetical or factual value

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[2] Udo Shaefer. *Ethic for a Global Society*. The Bahá'í Studies Review 1994 London, pp. 50-51.

dilemma would be presented to the class and would be discussed in small groups.

Some have claimed that the main reason for the failure of these models in moral education is the lack of adult guidance. William Kilpatrick wrote: "decision-making curriculums pose thorny and ethical dilemmas to students, leaving them with the impression that all morality is problematic and all questions of right and wrong are in dispute. Youngsters are forced to question values and virtues they've never acquired in the first place or upon which they have only a tenuous hold."[3] He claimed that the actual result of these methods is moral confusion.

Why had so much freedom been given to the students in moral education? Kirschenbaum explained in his article in which he tried to analyze the reasons for the failure of values clarification model:

"This immoderation was understandable. Louis Raths, the founder of values clarification, went through his professional formative years in the aftermath of World War II. He saw the excesses of fascism. He witnessed the newsreel of entire cultures that so relinquished their ability to choose freely and to defend their convictions publicly that they blindly followed their leaders into a moral abyss that surpassed the imagination. Then Raths and his students Harmin and Simon watched the United States go through the dark days of McCarthyism, when thinking for oneself and publicly expressing even the slightest dissent were considered by many to be un-American. To these three educators, values clarification- which emphasizes critical thinking, rational individual choice, and public affirmation- seemed a sensible and essential remedy against authoritarian leadership wherever it might appear. Suffice to say for now that we were so passionate about the importance of giving young people the skills necessary to make their own responsible decisions that we overstated our case."[4]

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[3]   Kilpatrick, William. Experiments in Moral Education. Talk given at the Seventh International Congress of Professors World Peace Academy Washington, 1997.
[4]   Kirschenbbaum, Howard. *A Comprehensive Model for Values Education and Moral Education*, Journal: Phi Delta Kappan, v.73 n.10 June 1992, pp. 77-176.

So after 30 years of experimenting with different models in moral education in schools, there are still disagreements on the most fundamental issues. Now in the 90's there is a revival of character education by which "good character" is placed as the central desirable outcome of the school's moral enterprise. There are core values which can withstand the test of reversibility (Would you want to be treated this way?) and universalizability (Would you want all persons to act this way in a similar situation?). Lickona writes about these values:

"They define our responsibilities in a democracy, and they are recognized by all civilized people and taught by all enlightened creeds. Not to teach children these core values is a grave moral failure."[5]

The new character education in the US calls upon an individual teacher to act as caregiver, model, and mentor. It asks of the school to create a moral community, to enforce rules and to involve students in decision-making thereby creating a democratic classroom environment. It suggests teaching of values through curriculum and through moral reflection.

In this respect, Kilpatrick talks about the power of aesthetics and believes that good books should be included in the moral education curriculum. He believes that people are convinced not by arguments, but by the force of beauty. The right and rich source of beauty comes from stories, images and memories that inspire the students to do the right things.

Moral Education in Singapore

Moral Education has been a compulsory subject in schools since Singapore attained self-government in 1959 and independence in 1965. Not unlike many newly independent countries, Singapore too was looking into the issues of curriculum content and the nature of moral education.[6]

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[5] Lickona, Thomas, *The Return of Character Education*, Journal, Educational Leadership, Vol.51 no.3 Nov. 1993, pp. 6-11.
[6] J Chew Oon Ai, *Civic and Moral Education in Singapore: Lessons for Citizenship Education?* Journal of Moral Education, 1998, Vol. 27 no. 4, pp. 504-524.

Starting with the late 1950's, a programme of "Ethics" was introduced in all primary and secondary schools with the objectives of inculcating values and laying the foundation for character development. The aim was to nurture the pupil into self-respecting and good citizens. Stories were used in primary schools and proverbs and aphorisms were taught in the secondary schools.

In the 60's, a programme of "Civics" replaced Ethics in upper primary school and the content was geared towards nation building. It was subsequently revised to introduce Asian values and culture in 1974, and was re-named Education for Living (EFL). The new subject was an integration of Civics, History and Geography and was taught in the mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay or Tamil).

In 1979, the Ong Teng Cheong Report on Moral Education found that Civics syllabus in secondary school as well as the EFL programme had little content on moral values. Those that were dealt with were too abstract and there were insufficient explanations on the moral and ethical principles behind them. The Report recommended Civics and EFL be replaced by Moral Education (ME) under three broad areas:

1) Personal Behaviour - habit formation and development of character
2) Social Responsibility - sense of belonging to the community and respect
   for cultural heritage
3) Loyalty to the Country - love of country and spirit of nation building.

Based on the Report, a common Moral Education syllabus for primary one to secondary two was issued to schools in 1983 with "Being and Becoming" Package for secondary and "Good Citizens" Package for primary schools.

At upper secondary level, Religious Knowledge (RK) and Confucian Ethics (CE) was introduced as a compulsory subject in 1984. The object of teaching RK and CE was to anchor the values acquired from primary one to secondary two through the teaching of one of the established religions/ethical systems. However the introduction of RK and CE proved to be controversial and was phased out in 1992.

Throughout the forty-odd years of implementing moral education in schools, the main thrust has been citizenship training, incorporating some moral development techniques such as values clarification into the lessons, and lessons on social living such as social etiquette and boy-girl relationships. With the introduction of the concept of National Education in 1995 by the Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong , this trend seems set to continue for many years to come.

Contributing Factors towards Limited Success of Moral Education

Among contemporary works analyzing the shortcomings of various moral education models in the US, the findings can be grouped under three categories:

1.   The Basic Flaws within the Models

The moral education of the 60's was concerned with ideas, with intellectual skills, and with structures of thinking. There was little attention to doing - to moral action or how one ought to behave.

Winston Langley wrote:

"The approach (abstract reflective) tends to see moral education and development as somewhat specialized rather than something that is all-pervading, spreading and assimilated into all areas of one's life. Second by virtue of its specialized and abstract nature, the approach rarely induces one to see the relationship between moral values and human condition. Indeed one can know very well the formal ideals and rules and yet never understand their application to ambient life."[7]

2.   Whose Values Should We Teach?

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[7] Langley, Winston, *Children, Moral Development, and Global Transformation,* World Order Magazine, Spring 1997, pp. 18-19.

In scientific and philosophical fields, values are not given the same recognition as facts. Values are regarded as mere feelings and not objective truths. Only facts, which can be scientifically proven, are objective truths. As a result, moral values are therefore relative truths, a matter of private and personal value judgement. As a subject, moral education becomes more of personal preference, as long as the reasoning power is cultivated in the minds of the students.

The increasing secularization of the public arena is another barrier to achieving the moral consensus indispensable for character education in schools. Government schools retreated from their once central role as moral and character educators.

3.   The Constraint of Teachers

James Leming[8] observed that teachers do not think of themselves as moral educators. The education system requires that teachers see themselves first as classroom managers. The demands on teachers' time and energy are a very real problem resulting in "burn-out" or cumulative fatigue. There is very little passion left to teach moral values, which are considered secondary in importance to academic subjects.

While these are very real problems and limitations, there are bigger issues that contribute to the limited successful implementation of moral education programmes.

The decline in moral discipline has to be looked upon as but one of the many complex problems facing humanity, all of which are interdependent. One of the main problems is the pattern of modern life that is based on accumulation of material wealth. Schumacher commented on the highest goals of the present generation :

"The development of production and acquisition of wealth have thus become the highest goals of the modern world in relation to which all

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[8] Leming, James S., "Kholbergian Programmes in Moral Education: A Practical Review & Assessment" in *Lawrence Kholberg, Consensus and Controversy*, Edited by Sohan Modgil and Celia Modgil, Falmer Press, Philadelphia, 1986.

other goals, no matter how much lip service may still be paid to them, have come to take second place. The highest goal require no justification; all secondary goals have finally to justify themselves in terms of the service their attainment renders to the attainment of the highest. This is the philosophy of materialism, and it is this philosophy -- or metaphysics -- which is now being challenged by events."[9]

Another worldwide trend that needs urgent address is the declining influence of parents over their children. The present set-up of schools is simply not equipped to take full responsibility in educating children, and will not succeed until parents exercise their inescapable duty to educate their children.

Human Spirit in Moral Education

Morality in the Bahá'í Faith is not merely following a set of do's and don'ts. Neither is it solely about the learning of virtues and values, both of which are insufficient. It is based upon relationships between people that necessitate moral behaviour and two powerful forces that can instill these moral virtues and values, religion and world citizenship, are presented here for discussion. They function in the domain of the human spirit and are the foundation for a new morality in a broadened, universal arena.

Religion as A Motivation Force

Teaching our children to differentiate right from wrong is not difficult. The problem is the cultivation of the will to do the right thing. Even as Confucius said of himself:

"Morality cannot be properly cultivated, learning cannot be deeply pursued, words of wisdom cannot be put into practice, bad habits cannot be changed – these are my greatest worries."[10]

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[9] E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful,* Sphere Books, 1974, p. 246.
[10] Confucius. *Analects Chap 9 Verse 23.* (Direct translation from Chinese text).

The current focus on moral education has been far removed from religion. Yet again and again when the issue of universal values is discussed, the recognised values such as justice, kindness, honesty and integrity are found in the teachings of all religions. There is little doubt that religion has the power to inspire scholars and the illiterate to a higher level of sacrifice and altruistic love, a feat no secular learning can match.

The Bahá'í Faith regards religion as a means for man to establish an authentic relationship with his Creator. In the process of knowing his Creator and thereby learning to love Him, he is able to establish the right relationship with his fellow men. Morality can then be firmly established upon greater and greater understanding of God: sacrifices are evoked for the love of God.

Fasting is a good example of sacrifice and self-discipline. Very few people would go on a period of fasting even when it has been proven medically to be beneficial to the body. Yet millions of religious followers abide by this law every year without the need of any physical justification. Many virtues are learnt in fasting: patience, moderation, mindfulness of the less fortunate, self-discipline, a prayerful attitude and humility. What lesson is more powerful than this?

On the enlightening and spiritualizing power of divine religions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá quoted the comment of Galen, a Greek philosopher, on the early Christians:

"The generality of mankind are unable to grasp a sequence of logical arguments. For this reason they stand in need of symbols and parables telling of rewards and punishments in the next worlds. A confirmatory evidence of this is that today we observe a people called Christians, who believe devoutly in rewards and punishments in a future state. This group shows forth excellent actions, similar to the actions of an individual who is a true philosopher. For example, we all see with our own eyes that they have no fear of death, and their passion for justice and fair-dealing is so great that they should be considered true philosophers."[11]

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[11] 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Wilmette, 1970, p. 84.

However, many religious teachings are now obscured by prejudices and dogmas. One of the most dangerous of present day religious dogmas is the prejudice that only one religion contains all truth, and the other religions are false. The degeneration of true religion into a set of dogmas has been the chief source of suffering. Religious followers were persecuted and at times put to death for subscribing to differing views. This frame of superiority and the desire to convert everyone else to the sole truth was the beginning of cultural disharmony when the Western powers expanded their influence and colonised the rest of the world.

While my proposition is to reintroduce religious teachings into the school curriculum on moral education, we have to be selective by excluding religious prejudices and concentrate on values that will promote understanding and love between people of all races and creeds. Religion has the force to empower man to rise above material pursuits. It induces in the human spirit a higher aspiration, a motivation and will to act beyond what he is normally asked for. To deprive our children of this immense source of knowledge and inspiration is both a disservice to them and to future generations.

World Citizenship

The idea that the next stage of man's social evolution is global unity is not new. World consciousness has been expressed by poets, gurus, saints, and many thoughtful men throughout history. It is not difficult to see that the world has to function as one country as we witness economic problems and environmental disasters that are global in scale and that are becoming more acute with each passing day. World summits and conferences have been called by world leaders from all nations to find ways to combat these issues on a united front, and yet we are still clinging to the age-old nationalistic, patriotic and racial loyalties that divide the world.

On the subject of world education, Harold Taylor writes:

"In the most optimistic reading of contemporary history, we could now say that we have reached a stage at which it has become necessary for the educated man to extend the dimension of his loyalty to the entire

human race. The conception of education itself must now be one which locates man intellectually in a universe described by scientists, artists, and writers, and in a cultural setting as big as the globe. To enjoy any longer the luxury of defining one's nation, one's society, or oneself in terms of pride of ancestry, social superiority, or power of destruction is not only supremely dangerous to the survival of the race, but intellectually and socially obsolete."[12]

World education is not just about geography, different cultures and lifestyles. It is about creating feelings of affection towards people of different beliefs, cultures and races in a globalised world. Where love and respect are shown only within limited sections of the community, hostility and prejudice will breed and no amount of moral education can transform prejudiced hearts.

Based on the Bahá'í principle of the oneness of the human race, teaching of world citizenship should cover those ethics that contribute to world civilization. It should teach the principle of "unity in diversity" with a common vision of world unity. Its promotion of the principle of oneness of mankind will be a potent force against the tide of racism, prejudice and violence to minorities. With this principle as the foundation, other virtues such as co-operation, kindness, integrity and the rest will become more meaningful in this period of the global maturity of man.

A new spirit has been infused by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborated:

"In this age his holiness Baha'u'llah has breathed the holy spirit into the dead body of the world; consequently every weak soul is strengthened by these fresh divine out-breathings – every poor man will become rich, every darkened soul will become illumined, every ignorant one will become wise, because the confirmations of the holy spirit are descending like torrents. A new era of divine consciousness is upon us. The world of humanity is going through a process of transformation. A new race is being developed. The thoughts of human brotherhood are permeating all

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[12] Taylor, Harold. *The World as Teacher*, Doubleday, New York, 1969, p. 3 quoted in Gayle Morrison's *Education for Worldmindedness*, World Order Magazine, Summer 1972.

regions. New ideals are stirring the depths of hearts and a new spirit of universal consciousness is profoundly felt by all men."[13]

Conclusion

At this juncture of human history, morality loses its meaning when it is confined to a single race, group or nation. It actually becomes dangerous and harmful to humanity as a whole. For moral education to succeed and serve mankind, sweeping changes to the structure of society also has to take place, for the school cannot effectively teach world citizenship while the world is still in disarray and divided along racial and ideological lines.

Throughout the history of man, the majority of immoral acts are committed not by the ordinary folk, but by the people in authority. They exploit, manipulate, persecute, and even put to death people who are weaker and people who profess different beliefs to theirs, all in the name of racial superiority, economic development and religion. It is no wonder why many have looked away from religion as a legitimate source of knowledge and inspiration. This is indeed the tragedy of mankind: skepticism on one side and blind belief on the other. To construct a new world civilization, moral education can play a part in offering the middle path and promote the principle of the oneness of man and his share and responsibility in a borderless world.

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[13] 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Star of the West, Vol. VIII no. 1 (March 21, 1917) p. 16.

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