

Theological Ethics in a Bahá'í Perspective

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"All ideas are true in so far as they are related to God."

Spinoza, *Ethics*, Part 2, Proposition 32.

Introduction

The Bahá'í writings and their authoritative interpretations are a rich source of moral precepts which await exploration by scholars seeking to discover what is characteristic and specific about the field. The Bábí-Bahá'í scriptures, the authoritative commentaries of `Abdu'l-Bahá, the case-by-case definitions of moral and theological issues by Shoghi Effendi and the Universal House of Justice provide a substantial corpus of ethical statements and guidance in the form of laws, directives, exhortations, injunctions, and axioms of moral theology.

The strong, clear voice of moral authority with which Bahá'u'lláh, as the divine revelator for our age, addresses humanity compels a reconsideration of the implications of an ethics based on the claim to a contemporary divine revelation and the proclamation of a new *Shari'ah*. Any study of Bahá'í ethics thus invites a correlation of the relationship between the divine command or scriptural imperatives on the one hand, and considerations of moral philosophy, theology and metaphysics on the other. Further, Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be the revelator of a new and divinely inspired scripture sets the relationship between divine and human moral codes in a fresh light and context, and gives an urgency that the discussion of questions of ethics and morality, so often viewed today as being irrelevant, quaint or obsolete, rightly deserves.

In one of his letters, Shoghi Effendi stressed the capital importance of Bahá'í morality when he wrote: "Too much emphasis is often laid on the social and economic aspects of the [Bahá'í] Teachings; but the moral aspect cannot be overemphasized."¹ It is, moreover, vital to stress that

¹. *Lights of Guidance*, no. 1136, p. 417.

ethics finds its fulfilment, not in discourse, but in *praxis*, which I use here as a shorthand term for the practice of the good deed. As `Abdu'l-Bahá so often emphasized:

Therefore, it is incumbent upon all Bahá'ís to ponder this delicate and vital matter in their hearts, that, unlike other religions, they may not content themselves with the noise, the clamour, the hollowness of religious doctrine. Nay, rather, they should exemplify in every aspect of their lives the attributes and virtues that are born of God, and should arise to distinguish themselves by their goodly behaviour. They should justify their claim to be Bahá'ís by deeds, not by name.²

The nature of Bahá'í ethics requires, moreover, several special considerations, two of which are mentioned here. The first, just alluded to, is to justify an ethic that claims to be grounded in a divine revelation which has broken in unawares on a modern age whose secularized world-view largely excludes transcendence, and which has long rejected any notion of divine command or authority. As for other issues, the Bahá'í position on revelation-ethics finds itself going against the current of the times. Considerations of secular moral philosophy dominate the field today. Many contemporary ethicists or moral philosophers reject the notion that ethics can be dominated by any consideration of the "divine commandment" theory. Such a theory is considered today as being arbitrary, doctrinaire and badly dated.

Here, as in other instances, Bahá'í scholars are having to swim against the stream, although it is certainly possible to find at the same time points of convergence. One of these points would be the role of natural law or reason in determining ethical behaviour, either for theists or humanists. This is, however, a question I do not explore in this paper but have examined in an expanded version of this presentation.

Bahá'ís are also fortunate that the discussion of Bahá'í ethics is not for them merely theoretical. What concrete ethical conduct and spirituality are for Bahá'ís has been modelled in exemplary fashion by `Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), the preeminent Bahá'í of Bahá'u'lláh's dispensation, his eldest son, and authorised interpreter and successor. As the "perfect exemplar" of his father's Faith, `Abdu'l-Bahá gave concrete meaning to the highest ideals of the Bahá'í life, ideals which every conscientious Bahá'í is called upon to emulate. Despite the duress of a severe persecution that spanned most of his life, `Abdu'l-Bahá continued to manifest the qualities of magnanimity throughout the rigours of old age to the very day of his death.

To further an understanding of Bahá'í ethics, this paper will discuss selected and vastly reduced moral, theological, metaphysical and spiritual dimensions that inform the pattern of Bahá'í sacred law. I address below the following concerns: (1) some broad considerations of Bahá'í ethics (2) legalism and antinomianism (3) the divine command and personal autonomy. I stress that this paper is selective. One cannot possibly cover or even allude to all the parameters of such a vast

². `Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Glad Tidings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 41.

question as Bahá'í ethics in such a brief presentation.

(1) Some Broad Considerations of Bahá'í Theological Ethics

I draw attention at the outset to an important distinction in the use of the terms "Bahá'í ethics" and "Bahá'í morality". While these two terms are generally synonymous, I distinguish them here this way: I use "Bahá'í morality" to refer to the well-defined but more insular moral code that is observed only by the members of the Bahá'í community in all aspects of their lives. "Bahá'í ethics", however, includes worldview. The Bahá'í ethical *Weltanschauung* (world view) refers not only to the Bahá'í moral/legal code, but also more broadly to those elements which lie in the realm of cosmology, spirituality and moral psychology. This then is the first point I would make in addressing the issue of Bahá'í ethics: Bahá'í ethics, while grounded in Bahá'í law, is situated within a much larger context, one that we might call cosmological. Now cosmology usually refers to the attempt by humans to devise a descriptive order of the universe, one that includes the individual as one of its elements. It is in short a universal spiritual vision of all things. It is important to stress this point, for it is only by locating divine law within a larger cosmological framework can one address the charge by non-theistic humanists of coercion or the restriction on conscious free choice and personal autonomy often levelled against those who adhere to the belief in divine command. The *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* quite clearly reflects, I think, this cosmological view since upon perusing the *Aqdas* we realise that in its structural form, it has not been revealed as a legal code *qua* legal code, as for example the priestly document of the Book of Leviticus is laid out, but contains also mystical, even poetical elements. Consider for example this statement of Bahá'u'lláh:

Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks. The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty." Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe. By My life! He who hath drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favour will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation.³

In this quotation we find law and obedience wedded with a mysticism of divine love couched in a very effusive Renaissance-like poetic language. The question of locating or appealing to some authority which in the Bahá'í view is of course sacred authority is crucial to any discussion of ethics. This notion of sacred authority follows quite naturally from the Bahá'í claim to a newly revealed body of scripture. Bahá'í ethical statements are rooted in the authority of the Bábí-Bahá'í revelations, that is, in the teachings of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, in the authoritative interpretations of `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi and in the on-going pronouncements of the Universal House of Justice on moral issues. Such authority derives from a view of the Divine Word as the most

³. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 4

complete and faithful expression of the Will of God. A second point to be made at the outset, then, is that authority relations are an inescapable feature of any discussion of Bahá'í morality and ethics. However, I think the exercise of authority and indeed the very meaning of authority is quite different in the Bahá'í Faith from that of its sister religions of the world and indeed from the exercise of power and authority in contemporary society.

A deeper understanding of the dynamics behind the laws and ethical practices of the Bahá'í revelation becomes all the more timely and urgent with the complete publication of the English language edition of Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Aqdas (The Most Holy Book)* in 1992. This book which Bahá'u'lláh has characterized as "the breath of life unto all created things"⁴ He has bequeathed as the model blueprint for the erection of a new world order characterised by a sorely needed justice which He has declared to be "the best beloved of all things"⁵ and "the essence of all that We have revealed for thee"⁶ to a society that has become increasingly materialistic, lawless, and corrupt. Indeed, there are many examples today that so-called civilised individuals have reverted to barbarism.

As 'Abdu'l-Bahá's quote read above clearly reveals, in the Bahá'í view ethics or morality constitute the heart of religion, and are viewed as being of greater importance for the life of the soul than metaphysical or theological doctrines, for in the final analysis *praxis* not speculation is what the prophets have demanded. Bahá'í scripture certainly does contain its fair share of some properly legal definitions, that is, those acts which are declared lawful or unlawful and for which punishments are prescribed when the law is broken. Bahá'í ethics, however, while it naturally includes a strong component of Bahá'í law, (the form) is revealed within the larger context of sacred teaching or the moral law. (the spirit).

It would be too facile, and I stress this point again in a slightly different sense, to entirely subsume the definition of Bahá'í ethics to Bahá'í law in its strictly legal sense. Such a simplistic reductionism does not do justice to the total character of Bahá'í sacred law on which ethics depends. It should be consequently clear that Bahá'í morality does not just depend upon obedience to legal definitions. While these definitions lie no doubt at the core of Bahá'í morality, ethical practice which has everything to do with spirituality, also derives, as I said above, from cosmology and from those universal mystical feelings which motivate a believer to unite the soul to God. A belief, for example, in the eternity and nobility of the human soul as the essence of human nature is not a moral injunction, but such a belief can profoundly influence one to behave morally. This is just one example of how cosmology can influence ethical behaviour.

There is a decidedly arbitrary nature attached to the divine imperatives which derive from a belief in the sovereignty and omnipotence of God and which have been revealed in the scriptures of

⁴. *Aqdas*, p. 16.

⁵. *The Hidden Words*, from the Arabic, no. 2.

⁶. *Tablets*, p. 157.

the world's great religions. Yet, such divine imperatives are not blind, for they invite the believer to philosophically "question" the law. It is highly significant in this light that Bahá'u'lláh in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* lifted the ban on questioning the founder of the faith which had prevailed in the Báb's dispensation.

In the Bayan it had been forbidden you to ask Us questions. The Lord hath now relieved you of this prohibition, that ye may be free to ask what you need to ask, but not such idle questions as those on which the men of former times were wont to dwell.⁷

Bahá'ís are enjoined consequently, not merely to blind obedience, but rather to seek out the wisdom of the sacred law and to discover the deeper purposes that lie behind it.

The laws and moral precepts in the Bahá'í writings are, moreover, strongly rational; that is, they can be profitably subjected to rational discourse, or defended through reason. A rational understanding of what constitutes the good or the happy life is as much a preoccupation of the modern Bahá'í as it was for the philosophers of ancient Greece. Such a rational approach to the understanding of ethics can be pursued in a dynamic tension in conjunction with a belief in the authority of divine revelation.

In the Bahá'í view, the divine imperatives are not imposed upon a believer solely from without or above so as to deprive him or her of personal autonomy. For in the Bahá'í view, it is only by coordinating one's life with divine law that an individual becomes truly emancipated from the dictates of self. Further, the divine law does not merely attempt to impose its will from the transcendent heights in arbitrary fashion. According to its wisdom, the divine law also regulates the inner life of the soul. Consequently, when the believer willingly consents to any divine injunction, he or she sets in motion a process of harmony between the greater and lesser worlds, a concordance of the macrocosm and microcosm, a correspondence between the material and spiritual worlds of which both `Abdu'l-Bahá and the schoolmen of the Middle Ages speak, in which the life of the soul moves in accordance with cosmic law.

Ethical living in a Bahá'í perspective can in no way be divorced from the wider notions of spirituality and spiritual transformation which partially answers the "How?" of ethics. In order to demonstrate ethical principles, the believer must be engaged in a process of spiritual transformation. Thus, any consideration of Bahá'í morality and ethics cannot be merely speculative. It must also be practical; that is, it must lead to the increased practice of spiritual virtues through a deeper understanding of moral and spiritual life. Thus, Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* taught that one should seek not only to understand virtue, but to become virtuous.⁸ In this way alone does the believer become credible.

⁷. *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 126.

⁸. *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 2, Chapter 2. (2:2) [quote]

Finally in leaving this discussion of some broad considerations of Bahá'í ethics, I would like to simply highlight what I view to be six vital components for a system of theological ethics. Unfortunately, time does not permit a discussion of each component in turn. I simply list them here as being functional imperatives of any effective ethical system. All are found within the Bahá'í Faith:

(1) Charismatic authority (2) Rational values (3) Coherent cosmology (4) Mystical Mood/Spiritual Atmosphere (5) Deterrents against wrong-doing (6) Ethical Role Modelling.

(2) Legalism and Antinomianism: No Mere Code of Laws

The history of religions informs us that practitioners of religion run the risk of falling into one of two extremes where their moral codes are concerned: legalism and antinomianism. The legalistic attitude reduces morality to a discussion of "the laws" (the form) without due regard either to the spirit of sacred law or its implications for spirituality or the practical wisdom which such laws furnish. The legalist regards "the laws" primarily as moral absolutes that are to be blindly obeyed. Bahá'u'lláh, however, counsels us to a *faithful* obedience of the sacred law which is a far cry from blind obedience. He says:

Whenever My laws appear like the sun in the heaven of Mine utterance, they must be faithfully obeyed by all, though My decree be such as to cause the heaven of every religion to be cleft asunder. He doth what He pleaseth. He chooseth; and none may question His choice.⁹

When we consider this passage in light of `Abdu'l-Bahá's definition of "faith" as "conscious knowledge", obedience takes on a significantly different nuance. Bahá'í law is to be adhered from a position of true knowing, rather than a mere theoretical understanding. It is, moreover, all too often true that disobedience leads the repentant believer into a state of a true understanding of the law and the wisdom it contains, thus rendering knowledge of the law truly conscious. Further, Bahá'u'lláh Himself would appear to have anticipated and rejected such a legalistic attitude when He revealed:

Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power. To this beareth witness that which the Pen of Revelation hath revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight.¹⁰

Bahá'u'lláh's exhortation to meditate on the *Aqdas* is in itself significant. If the prescriptions of the moral law were straightforward and sufficient unto themselves, there would be no need for

⁹. *Gleanings*, p. 333.

¹⁰. *Aqdas*, para. 21.

meditation. The exhortation to meditate on the liberating and transformational effects of the sacred law is itself a declaration that the law has deeper purposes. Further, the symbol of "the choice Wine" points to clear mystical dimensions with Súfí antecedents which transcend its strictly legal definitions. The well-known Súfí motif in the above reference brings to mind the familiar trope of the heavenly cup-bearer who proffers the intoxicating wine of the divine presence of the Beloved who features so prominently in Persian poetry.

Bahá'u'lláh's reference to the sacred law as the intoxicating "choice Wine" underscores the fact that the sacred law is not meant to stultify or constrain the believer. On the contrary, his allusion sensitizes to the liberating possibilities released by the sacred law, to that inebriation or enthusiasm marked by the mystic presence of the divine lawgiver within the human soul. If we carry the image of divine intoxication further, it extends naturally into another image: that of the dance. The recipient of the law is "Seized with transports of joy"¹¹ and taking the law into her arms dances the dance of joy as one would dance with a beloved. We are presented with this very image when the prophet David, king of Israel, dances with the Torah in his arms. This practice of the dance of delight with the Torah continues with the orthodox Jews to this day. `Abdu'l-Bahá also, in his Naw Rúz greeting exhorts the believers to dance for joy at the dawn of the New Day.

The quest for self-justification through the praxis of a "mere code of laws" stands out as one of the marks of the legalistic mind. Further, the legalist concludes that observing the concrete practices of the religious laws, *ex opere operato*, is sufficient for salvation; that is, a believer can be saved through mere *praxis*, regardless of the subjective attitudes, motives or states of mind that inspire the believer to observe the law. While the legalistic attitude seeks to imitate the arbitrary and unambiguous nature of the sacred law, what it gains in dogmatic certainty, it loses in the understanding of the *raison d'être* of the law. Divine law is, after all, revealed to the world as *teaching*, one of the meanings of *Torah* (Heb.=teaching). Teaching implies, of course, not just obedience but understanding.

All divine laws in the Bahá'í Faith are placed within a context of understanding or are couched within an atmosphere that invites learning. The legalist is blind-sighted to this understanding and fails to investigate the larger ethical and spiritual purposes of the law. Further, legalism fails to do justice to the spirit of the law by concentrating exclusively on its letter and by insisting on outward practice, and fails to take into account the *inwardness* of the law, the inner law that regulates the soul, whose motivating power is especially the desire to please God and to reflect the sacred names and attributes in one's life.

The other extreme view of the moral code is the antinomian one. The expression "antinomianism" comes from the Greek and when broken down into its cognates translates as "against law". Antinomianism originated in Christianity and expresses an extreme attitude toward gospel that derives from Luther's doctrine of the justification of faith; that is, the Christian, because

¹¹. Tablet of Carmel, *Gleanings*, p. 14.

of sanctifying grace, is absolved from observing the moral law. Antinomianism is lawless ethics and we find extreme forms of it during the Reformation in such fanatical groups as the Anabaptists who denied that regenerated persons sinned even when committing gross and evil acts.¹² Antinomianism predated Luther, however, and we might find such tendencies to interpret St. Paul's doctrine of justification by faith in order to justify moral licence in the early church.¹³ One can possibly find echoes of this attitude in Paul's response to the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica, although one might also interpret the sexual licence prevalent in these communities as simply being typical of the Greek social mores in the Mediterranean world. Extreme Calvinists during the later half of the nineteenth century also held that they were absolved from the moral law and were consequently not called upon to repent since the elect were predestined to salvation.¹⁴

There were also antinomian tendencies in Islam. Following the crucifixion of Al Halláj, many Súfís moved to Khurasan and Transoxania where they enjoyed greater toleration under the Samání dynasty and where, under the leadership of Abú Sa`íd (d. A.D. 1049), they were instrumental in the conversion of the Asiatic Turks to Islam. Like the more extreme Shí`ah, these antinomians separated faith from works and embraced theosophical ideas.

(3) The Divine Command and Personal Autonomy

Modern ethicists place the virtue of autonomy which they equate with liberty, freedom or free will, very high on the scale of values. This strong valuation of autonomy dates back to Kant who regarded "the autonomy of the will as the supreme principle of morality."¹⁵ Although Kant recognized the concept of a perfect, divine will, he did not count as reliable the individual's ability to interpret the divine will in any sure way, believing that "we have no intuition of the Divine perfection, and can only deduce it from our own conceptions..."¹⁶ Kant also rejected the promised reward of the divine attributes of "glory and dominion, combined with the awful conceptions of might and vengeance..."¹⁷ no doubt because he viewed fear as a base motive in governing human conduct and because of the frightful anthropomorphic notions of the Deity upon which these concepts were based.

Some modern ethicists likewise reject a belief in the divine command and reward and punishment because like Kant they believe that belief in the divine command deprives the

¹². "Antinomianism", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1959.

¹³ "Antinomianism", *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1959.

¹⁴. *ibid.*

¹⁵. *Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 371.

¹⁶. *ibid*, p. 374.

¹⁷. *Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 371.

individual of personal autonomy, the ability to think, move and act as a free agent.

An extreme view of the anti-divine command theorists is represented by Graeme de Graaff who writes:

There is no room in morality for commands, whether they are the father's, the schoolmaster's or the priest's. There is still no room for them when they are God's commands. A moral agent is only in very special circumstances permitted to shelter behind the excuse, 'I was ordered to do it'. In morality we are responsible even for those actions which are responses to commands. We are responsible for obeying a command. Some commands given by some people ought not to be obeyed. It would be wicked to obey them.¹⁸

Graeme de Graaff, it would appear, recognizes no clear distinctions between commands defined by *content*. It is the obedience to the command that is wrong. Obeying God's commands is likened to the Nazi officer who obeys his superiors in order to liquidate Jews!

Bahá'ís are moreover encouraged by the founders of the Bahá'í Faith to act as free, strong and autonomous beings. `Abdu'l-Bahá states that the life of the human being must demonstrate "independence of spirit"¹⁹ This freedom and strength, however, are conferred by acting in conformity to the divine will. Speaking the language of paradox, Bahá'u'lláh says:

Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.²⁰

One gains liberty, then, by submission to God which is, of course, the keynote of Islam. In his use of paradoxical language in this passage--gaining liberty through submission--Bahá'u'lláh is not merely engaging in rhetorical flourishes but is rather expressing a true spiritual condition.

¹⁸. Graeme de Graaff, "God and Morality" in Ian T. Ramsey, ed., *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Philosophy*, p. 34.

¹⁹. (*Selections*, p. 146) The proper context of this phrase was `Abdu'l-Bahá's counsel to the Bahá'ís on purity and health. The phrase "independence of spirit" is found in the prologue of the tablet which goes on to strongly counsel against tobacco smoking. However, the aim of `Abdu'l-Bahá's counsel, that the Bahá'ís act free and independently, applies equally well I think to the moral realm to which his exhortation belongs. `Abdu'l-Bahá counselled the Bahá'ís that they should demonstrate "freedom from enslavement", that they should show knowledge and self-control and "be first among the pure, the free and the wise." (*Selections*, p. 150) In this tablet, `Abdu'l-Bahá refers to prophetic teaching as "rain-showers of divine mercy, and they cleanse the human heart." (p.146)

²⁰. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 125.

When paradox accompanies ethical speech, it often indicates that the individual is being summoned to transcend him or herself, to push beyond the limits, to make a great effort. `Abdu'l-Bahá writes elsewhere: "Make up your mind to do very great things". One of these "very great things" is the living of the ethical and spiritual life which is a great thing in itself, perhaps the greatest. It is no mean feat to live in harmony with the sacred law, as some might have imagined, as if one had to act unthinkingly, merely obeying the divine counsel like an automaton. Human beings, in any case, do not always obey the divine command with ease. Yet countless witnesses throughout the ages have testified that through toil and struggle, failure and setback, new heights of consciousness can be reached and deeper levels of peace and contentment are experienced when the wisdom of the divine law is clearly perceived and one is able through spiritual discipline to put the sacred law into practice.

Paul Tillich's tripartite division of the moral law is both insightful and useful for an understanding of how divine command theory does not challenge individual autonomy, but rather works with it. Tillich established the connection between moral government and autonomy through the medieval and Renaissance doctrine of the correspondence of the outer more objective sacred law and the expression of that law as it regulates the inner harmony of the soul. Tillich distinguishes three modes of ethics: (i) autonomy (ii) heteronomy (iii) theonomy. Autonomy stands at one extreme of the scale. In this view, the human being is viewed as a free moral agent, liable only to the dictates of self, totally independent of what are viewed as transcendent, coercive forces; that is, the individual is a law unto himself. At the other extreme of the scale stands heteronomy. Here the law is welcomed as a coercive force, imposed from above, "strange and superior"²¹ to the believer and is to be obeyed without question. The individual who accepts the heteronomous view of the divine command is happy to unthinkingly abdicate personal freedom to obey the law and also to impose it on others. History offers numerous examples of the catastrophes that result when the religious fanatic or political opportunist espouses a heteronomous view of divine law or self-serving or repressive human polity.

The balance of autonomy and heteronomy, according to Tillich, is theonomy. Theonomy asserts that the sacred law is multi-dimensional, that is, the sacred law is not merely arbitrarily imposed from the transcendent heights, but lies also within the innermost self of the individual. The ground of the sacred law is at the same time the individual's ground. In theonomy, the individual seeks to understand the wisdom of the sacred law. His understanding of the wisdom of the law is in itself an act of liberation. The believer freely embraces the law and sees it as the guiding force of life and the most cherished desire of the heart. When the believer acts in accordance with the divine law, he or she puts the inner life of the soul into harmony with the eternal cosmic law. The sacred law awakens and strengthens what already lies dormant within.

Bahá'í ethics reflects further a view of God that is covenantal. Following this view, God reveals His will through prophetic teaching and stipulates that human beings conduct themselves in a manner that befits their high station. Accordingly, the divine command theory relies on the ancient

²¹. Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p. 56 ff.

analogy of God as the divine monarch, or benevolent ruler which easily convolutes into an extended theological motif.²² God, following this analogy, is viewed as a divine legislator, One who rules by divine right and reveals injunctions and commandments, which the prophets, His ambassadors or emissaries, reveal to humanity through divinely inspired moral codes. The prophets are thus seen both as the educators of the individual human soul, and collectively as the progenitors of the growth of civilizations throughout history.

Bahá'ís view the rule of God and His right to command as being firmly entrenched in the reflection of the divine attributes of unconditioned power, unrivalled sovereignty and unconstrained authority. However, I must sound a cautionary note here. Such a theological view of God with its notions of absolute power does not countenance, for example, the cruel suppression of those who do not share its views. The view of God as benevolent ruler is in turn based upon a personal concept of divinity; that is, although God is not a person, at least as we normally understand the term, our understanding of God is personal, that is, partially calculated on human analogies of Him. For, short of mystical experience, it is only by analogy that we can understand something of the nature of God.

Conclusion

I close with the following observations. First, as in many other areas of burgeoning Bahá'í studies, there is a great need to explore Bahá'í ethics in a systematic and scholarly fashion in order to determine what may be specific or characteristic about the field.²³ In the few preliminary observations I have made in this paper, I have noted that the specificity of Bahá'í theological ethics might reveal at the very least the following characteristics:

- (1) that Bahá'í ethical behaviour cannot be reduced to, nor should it fall into the trap of legalism; that is, one cannot practice ethical behaviour nor spirituality by a slavish, unthinking obedience to Bahá'í law. Bahá'í law, as the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* reveals, has been unveiled to humanity within a broader cosmological context that includes poetic and mystical elements; in short, worldview, and is grounded as well in the strong belief in the immortality of the soul as the enduring, permanent reality of the human being.
- (2) Obedience to the divine command is binding upon all for it is a perfect reflection of the divine will, in so far as we are able to understand it. Only by obedience to the divine command will the aspiring Bahá'í attain unto true liberty.

²². The heavenly court, "the concourse on high. The ambassadors or emissaries, ordinary believers as subjects who owe the king obedience. The kind is surrounded by a divine nobility. Courtesy.

²³. Since these lines were written, Dr. Udo Schaefer has published with George Ronald Publisher an excellent exhaustive two volume study of *Bahá'í Ethics*.

- (3) Obedience to the divine command, while it may appear to curtail personal autonomy and at times to present great challenges, even hardships, brings in its wake enhanced wisdom and maturity, new heights of consciousness and deeper levels of contentment and peace of mind. Faithful and enlightened obedience to divine law contributes to the individual's sense of well-being and sets the believer free to experience the joy of the liberating atmosphere of God's holy will and pleasure.