The Missing Moral Dimension

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Introduction

Many areas of our social fabric today are fashioned by policies which are largely materially efficient and technically sound. These sectors can be as diverse as economic growth and technopreneurship as well as health and education. Despite the characteristic progress that we see or are expected to see with such policies, there is however, for me, an uneasy feeling that something is missing, something fairly vital: a dimension that also pays heed to graciousness within and between individuals, a dimension that, though it may not immediately and directly result in revenue, efficiency or productivity, is crucial, in the longer run and indirectly, for these same objectives. I believe that our government is also aware of this missing dimension in our society - as exemplified by our Prime Minister's recent analysis regarding the need to develop graciousness in our society:

"Singaporeans cannot just be materialistic, self-centered and impatient to get rich quick. My vision is a Singapore where every citizen strives to make Singapore a better home, where people are considerate and well-behaved towards one another, where everyone is well-educated, trained and employed, gracious, happy and enjoying a high quality of life. Graciousness, honesty and care for one another are important features of a civilized society."[1]

Technically sound and materially efficient policies, while good for promoting economic welfare and external comfort, are still inadequate to address certain inner, value-centered or moral needs. Moreover, awareness of this moral dimension increases and the actualization of the

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[1] Goh C.T., *A Better Home for All*, in: *Speeches* - Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches, Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1996, 20 (4), pp. 4-8.

highest human potentials becomes more possible as society achieves a basic level of stability and prosperity.[2] With a little reflection, one realizes that this dilemma is not peculiar to Singapore alone and no developed society has truly solved it. In this brief presentation, I would like to attempt an analysis of what I regard to be a withered and withering moral dimension in our manifold endeavours. This paper argues that the saga goes beyond any specific society or individual; it is our collective and historical narrative of a continually evolving humanity and the main objective of this analysis is to suggest a possible approach to moral recovery.

I think it is also important at the outset to state what will not be covered in today's talk. I am extremely aware how a topic such as this closely interfaces with moral philosophy, but the latter will be largely avoided. One reason is in the interests of time, but more importantly, from what I have come to know about contemporary moral philosophy, it has actually failed to provide us with clear answers to the central questions of moral enquiry. I can only adumbrate upon this failure in this presentation but the interested reader can refer to some excellent books describing in-depth the historical reasons leading to the philosophical difficulties as well as the pervasive and paralyzing moral relativity of our age.[3,4]

To transcend the failure of moral philosophy requires, I believe, a return to the theological foundations of the moral dimension. Historically, these foundations occupied a dominant position in the governance of society and it will be instructive to briefly review the reasons why spiritual perspectives have become marginalized in many developed nations. A return to the metaphysical origins of ethics requires a new spiritual paradigm that will not result in the same prejudices and errors which were enacted in the name of religion in the past. Once moral clarity and justification can be restored through a spiritual basis, then moral responsibility can be re-exercised in all our manifold endeavours, improving the ethos of our social life.

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[2] Maslow AH. *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature,* p. 7.

[3] MacIntyre A., *After Virtue.*

[4] MacIntyre A., *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry.*

With regards to the new spiritual paradigm, as well as how it can bring about moral recovery, I shall quote several times from the Bahá'í writings. Those who know the Bahá'í Faith reasonably well will immediately realize that the quotations refer to spirituality or religion in general and not just specifically to the Bahá'í Faith. For those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, a few introductory words are necessary. The Bahá'í Faith, with its birth in 1844, is the youngest of the world's religions and its central message is that divine revelation is periodic, continual and progressive with each revelation reaffirming the eternal changeless spiritual laws already enunciated by earlier religions. At the same time it has brought new social laws that may differ from its predecessors, since social laws have to be relevant for the changing needs of an ever-advancing human civilization. It is with this central tenet of progressive religion that it espouses its three cardinal principles of Oneness of God, Oneness of Religions and Oneness of Mankind. Thus the Bahá'í Faith makes no distinctions between religions in terms of any being better or superior. All religions and all prophets are equal in status and their purpose, when understood and practised properly, is to morally support an ever-evolving civilization. These perspectives will have to be kept in mind in the discussion.

Moral Atrophy

The first part of today's talk focuses on some of the important reasons that have led to the atrophy of the moral dimension in our lives and our interactions with one another. I believe there are three main reasons: firstly, the regarding of "facts" as being superior to "values" (which, ironically, is in itself a value judgement); secondly, the problem of moral subjectivism or relativism, and lastly, psychological factors pertaining to moral commitment and freedom.

Facts vs Values

From the period of Enlightenment onwards, a progressive belief has occurred in all urbanizing parts of the world that the route to success for humanity in all its endeavours is through the scientific method, which is

founded upon empiricism and rationality. Science has repeatedly demonstrated its ability to both predict as well as control various natural events, resulting in material comfort for all of humanity. This spectacular success of science has produced a rather unique mode of thinking that now influences all of us: the way to solve all problems is by employing the scientific method to first define problems in objective terms, then solve them objectively through empirical and rational methods and thus arrive at objective solutions. Objectivity - meaning observability, measurability and hence testability - is so fundamental to the scientific attitude that there is now a pervasive inclination in many developed and developing societies that whatever is non-observable and non-measurable is less important or, worse still, not important. Facts are thus prized over values since the former are characteristically objectifiable and quantifiable and hence amenable to further analysis and application, but the latter are typically not so.

Philosophers and scientists have pointed out, however, that the foundations of scientific objectivity are themselves theory-laden and resting upon certain very non-objective and non-testable assumptions such as the principles of lawfulness of nature and finite causation.[5,6] But these expositions have by and large gone unheeded and instead, there exists a widespread, but unjustified certitude in the abilities of a theory- and value-neutral science to solve all the problems of humanity. That such capabilities, even if true, are restricted to the measurable domain of our existence and therefore have only a limited and finite role (since the totality of our life experiences includes also the important, but non-quantifiable, inner world of emotions and meanings) is seldom, if ever, reflected upon.

With the attitude that the study of human values rank second to the study of scientific facts, compounded further by not having objective, testable approaches to solving moral disagreements, ethics have become relegated to a secondary role in our society. Thus the moral dimension comes into our lives nowadays in a less immediate, less direct and more watered-down mode, typically associated with the sanctions imposed by society's legal institutions. They define for us our minimal codes of

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[5] Khursheed A., *The Universe Within*, pp. 84-93.

[6] Maxwell SE, Delaney HD. *Designing Experiments and Analyzing Data*, pp. 6-11.

conduct and relationships and are largely characterized in contractual terms. Moral inspiration and excellence of character are not within the courts' purview and thus not the social focus of our lives. In fact, such notions appear archaic and anachronistic, and their direct relevance have become questionable in the face of the overwhelming need to strive for technical excellence and wealth acquisition.

Subjectivism and Relativism

The lack of objective standards in morality leads to moral subjectivism. The truth of an ethical stand is to be perceived subjectively by each one of us. Such moral convictions that originate from within can be powerful enough to guide our actions, but the justifications for these convictions cannot be measured nor tested. In sum, moral subjectivism implies that when an individual thinks something is ethically justified, he cannot - as long as he is not breaking any legal statutes - be proven wrong, scientifically. Even when a law is violated, the wrongness of that action can only be classified as such by predefined legal statutes and not be established by an empirical or rational analysis of the underlying ethical stand that prompted the wrong action.

It is in this way that moral truth also becomes relativistic - relative to the individual or culture concerned. Embedded in this concept is that each individual is entitled to his own notions of what right and wrong is, and that he does not have to be accountable for his ethical stands. It is hardly surprising then that such relativism in moral standards has rapidly led to a state of having no standards whatsoever, with each individual only promoting his self-interests, especially in a social environment that gives the message that everyone is only worth his marketable talents and that nobody else is going to be responsible for him or to care for him. Another consequence stemming from moral plurality is that since nothing conclusive can be proven scientifically within the ethical realm, there is no need to waste so much time, and care so much about, moral issues. Thus, what moral relativism almost always leads to is moral indifference and if the contemporary media is anything to go by, moral indifference is pervasive.

If we accept the simple definition that what we mean when we use the word "moral" involves the caring or concern for others, then both the fuzziness of ethical standards through moral relativism and the consequent moral indifference lead relentlessly to our present situation - a situation where progressively (or more accurately, regressively) we care less and less for others. In summary, ethical relativism marks the failure of modern moral philosophy's self-set tasks from the beginning of the Enlightenment to use empirical reasoning alone (and avoid teleological, non-scientific reasoning as exemplified by the religious approach to ethics) to derive for humanity its required set of moral standards.

Psychological Matters

Over and beyond the philosophical history of ethical plurality, a related characteristic of many urbanized societies is the psychological weakening of the individual's will to be committed to, and struggle towards, a moral lifestyle. As Fromm has pointed out, many people today shun away from effort, commitment and discipline (and all of these traits are crucial for the leading of an ethical life); the causes of this "no effort - no pain" doctrine[7] are several, including the culture emanating from technical progress that has cumulatively been liberating the human race from hard work. Fukuyama, in articulating the perspectives of Nietzsche, has observed how as humanity moved historically from authoritarian, aristocratic regimes towards more tolerant, democratic cultures, the climate of discipline in society correspondingly withered, resulting in an ascent of mediocrity.[8] Facilitating this trend further are the elaborate developments within the media industry that have often emphasized superficial personality over depth of character, creating in the process an impression that a happy life generally is an easy life, both physically and psychologically.

For a significant segment of our society, the contemporary fuzziness of ethical standards conveniently provides an excuse for moral laxity. One can now argue that moral standards themselves are contentious and

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[7] Fromm E., *The Art of Being*, pp. 24-26.

[8] Fukuyama F., *The End of History and the Last Man*, pp. 300-312.

unclear and that there is therefore no logical justification for expending effort or discipline to maintaining any high moral standards. One can also state that the very concept of obeying a set of eternal moral laws runs counter to the fundamental precept of man's inner freedom, an ideal that all liberal societies cherish and uphold. Again, as Fromm has pointed out, the underlying spirit of anti-authoritarianism that characterizes such clamours for freedom, while they may have had certain valid historical origins, is largely these days a rationalization for unrestrained fulfillment of all forms of passive whims, rather than valuing opportunities to creatively develop an active will.[9] Needless to say, such insights are not part of mainstream social awareness.

All the above factors have resulted in a moral vacuum and what has stepped in to fill this void, so as to still give life purpose, meaning and direction, is promotion of self-interests. In fact, nurturing, advancing and fulfilling self-interests are now considered to be valid, rational and legitimate activities at all levels of society, and they have been predominantly responsible for the contemporary "culture of Narcissism".[10]

Moral Recovery

Reconceptualizing Religion

The above analysis focussed on how philosophy and science have failed to give the moral dimension of our lives a good objective grounding as well as how, in conjunction with some of the peculiarities of a modern lifestyle, they have been unable to provide the necessary impetus for moral commitment. This state of affairs has arisen because Science and Philosophy were thought to be more than capable substitutes for Religion which traditionally had always been the acknowledged fountainhead of morality. The consequent narcissistic and self-centred culture is unsurprisingly producing a calculative, manipulative and uncaring atmosphere. In the interests of reversing this trend, it is

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[9]   Fromm E. *The Art of Being*, pp. 26-29.
[10]   Lasch C., *The Culture of Narcissism*.

necessary at this stage to ask whether one can still turn back to Religion to redeem that moral dimension for all of us, as individuals and as society. To properly answer this question we need to be aware of the important reasons that caused the dethronement of Religion in the first place.

The main problems were related to the according of initiative and power to the leaders of religious institutions and their subsequent corruption. The misuse of power by ecclesiastical leaders resulted in hypocrisy and injustice and with the constricting atmosphere of religious intolerance, the individual believer was powerless to protest against any corruption or unfairness. Also agonizing was religious prejudice that was largely fomented by the same leaders and the cruelties and mayhem inflicted against members of another religion. Thus what transpired as power in Religion, which was originally meant to be the experience of the love of God, was the subjugation to, and injustice from, religious institutions. Hence, when the advent of the scientific revolution displaced Religion from its central role in society, many resolved never to allow such patterns of religious power and prejudice to dominate society again.

This background awareness and understanding is crucial as we are now poised to reexamine the usefulness of Religion in restoring the moral dimension of our lives. Is it possible to reaccept Religion while simultaneously avoiding the horrors and ills of the past that Religion has itself perpetrated? If the answer to this is "no", meaning that the horrors and harms of Religion have been, are, and will always be inevitable, then we might as well stop the enquiry here. A remedy, by definition, must not be as bad or worse than the problem it is trying to rectify. It will then also be pointless to examine more closely the relevant conceptual links between morality and religion. Thus our first step is to wonder whether it is possible for Religion to reoccupy a central role in our society - can it do this sensibly, moderately and usefully? To address this matter, imagination is the needed faculty.

Imagine a conceptualization of Religion that accepts all human beings and religions to be equal, coming from the one and same Source. This oneness of religion is to be understood through a principle called progressive revelation - that Divine revelation periodically comes to mankind from God, with each religion arriving at a time when the

preceding one is waning in its influence. Revelation comes through a Prophet-Founder, and all Prophet-Founders are deemed equal, with none being superior over others. Each Revelation has at least two aspects: (a) the eternal - which comprise the core spiritual principles that are essentially timeless and universal in their application and (b) the social - which comprises the specific laws governing social conduct and matters relevant to the era that the Revelation occurs in. The latter, unlike the former, varies from religion to religion, since the social laws have to meet the changing needs of an ever-advancing human civilization. Such differences between religions, however, are secondary and should never be the grounds for dissension or division. In fact, imagine a Religion where one is encouraged "to look into all things with a searching eye", and discern the underlying oneness behind the varied forms of reality.[11]

Over and beyond this vital oneness of God, religion and man, imagine a conceptualization of Religion that exhorts independent investigation of truth by all individuals .without bias or fear and encourages individual initiative and enterprise. The role and function of religious institutions are clearly defined and the relationship between the individual and institution specified, each recognizing and respecting the responsibilities of the other. No individual is given power over other people. The authority of the institutions is that of the institutions' and not of the individuals' who comprise the institutions and these individuals themselves are prayerfully elected regularly with no campaigning or partisan politics. Above all, imagine a Religion which encourages excellence in moral, scientific and artistic endeavours and sees scientific enterprise as not being in opposition with spiritual strivings; a Religion which does not negate the world, requiring from its adherents service towards humanity, and yet at the same time reminding everyone that the realities of this life do not constitute the Ultimate Reality, that worldly participation therefore must always be coupled with an attitude of spiritual detachment.

If such a Religion or understanding of Religion were possible would we allow ourselves the possibility of its re-acceptance to our society and to ourselves? I venture that to the many who are reflective and fair-minded, the answer to this question will be "yes" and this is exactly the

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[11] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 157.

understanding of Religion that the Bahá'í Faith provides[12] - not just of itself but about Religion in general, embracing in the process, the truth of all Religions before and after.

It needs to be emphasized that even when Religion is reinstated to a central position in our society, its ability to improve the moral dimension of our lives is tied up then with how we truly practice its core principles. In other words, even when we can call ours to be a religious society, the mere presence of that word "religious" will not result in any transformations till we ourselves are willing to be transformed spiritually, in accordance with the central teachings of Religion. This means, amongst other matters, our readiness to voluntarily impose limits to the promotion of self-interests and for us to be genuinely concerned with, and help improve the welfare of others. However, the willingness to incorporate a spiritually-based code of ethics into our lives requires that we are also clear about Religion's perspectives on moral justification and moral commitment and it is to this that we now turn.

Moral Justification

If we can sufficiently re-conceptualize Religion as above, to the point that we are not intrinsically prejudiced against its possible return to our lives, then what is necessary at this stage is to examine underlying concepts in Religion's basis for moral justification and its enjoinders to moral commitment. Firstly, the issue of justifying the truth of moral actions. If we accept the framework that there are 4 approaches to truth in general[13]. (1) Truth that you feel, (2) Truth that you are told, (3) Truth that the senses reveal and (4) Truth revealed through reason, then the moral truth of Religion is given its grounding primarily by (2) - the Truth that you are told. Both (1) and (4) are also involved - eventually the truth that has been told to us requires further verification from our capacities to reason and feel; but essentially they only serve to corroborate, and by themselves, are unable to derive the truth of morality.

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[12] Hatcher W.S., Martin J.D., *The Bahá'í Faith*.

[13] Fernandez-Armesto F., *Truth*.

What does it mean, "Truth that you are told" in the context of Religion? It is the acknowledgement of the truth of Religion as given by the revelation of its Prophet-Founder. In other words, the truth of Religion is predicated upon, first and foremost, the truth of its Prophet-Founder and not, as many may have believed, the truth of God, who, by definition, is inaccessible and incomprehensible to all of us. A fundamental concept elucidated in the Bahá'í Writings is how the knowledge of the Divine Messengers is tantamount to the knowledge of God, and is in fact, the only mode made available for humanity to know God:

"... The door of the knowledge of the Ancient Being hath ever been, and will continue forever to be, closed in the face of men. No man's understanding shall ever gain access unto His holy court. As a token of His Mercy, however, and as a proof of His loving kindness, He hath manifested unto men the Day-Stars of His divine guidance, the Symbols of His divine unity, and hath ordained the knowledge of these sanctified Beings to be identical with the knowledge of His own Self. Whoso recognizeth Them hath recognized God. Whoso hearkeneth to their call, hath hearkened to the Voice of God, and whoso testifieth to the truth of their Revelation, hath testified to the truth of God Himself..." [14]

To establish the veracity of the Divine Messengers is a more accessible first step than to grasp the elusive, non-objectifiable and indefinable concept of God and once this crucial step of recognizing the truth of Religion's Prophet-Founders is taken (and its details are further discussed below), then moral truth, as enunciated by the Prophet, becomes grounded, attains "objective" standards and very importantly, allows for the evaluation of which actions are to be regarded as moral and which are not.

The use of the word "objective" in this context, however, requires careful consideration. There is objectivity insofar as the source of truth is still outside of ourselves, not rendering morality therefore to be a totally arbitrary subject matter, but the objectivity of this realm is still not the same as scientific objectivity. For one, it is non-measurable and thus beyond any scientific analysis, and secondly, as one of its corroborating steps, it requires from us also a feeling for the truth of its

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[14] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 49-50.

contents which, from an empirical scientific perspective, is neither necessary nor sufficient for truth verification. Lastly, the objectivity of moral truth, even when understood as springing from the truth of Religion's Prophet-Founders, still allows for a subjective latitude in the interpretation of moral principles and their specific application in our daily lives. These interpretations and applications can still differ from individual to individual in accord with their varying inclinations and capacities to understand and practise moral truth. Diversity is thus allowed for in the spiritual context but what needs to be observed is that the variations of moral expression are not totally random. Figuratively, there is a well-defined centre, and the types of action classified as moral oscillate within a fixed band around this centre. This model of truth, as fluctuations within a band from the centre is again at variance with the classical notions of scientific truth where fluctuations of understanding or practice about core principles are not typically accommodated. However, the variations of moral expression as allowed for by Religion are such that limits are still imposed upon moral subjectivity and thus, unlike the consequences of post-modern moral philosophy, the world of moral behaviour in the Religious paradigm never becomes total anarchy. This, in essence, becomes Religion's greatest contribution to moral clarity.

Once the truth of the Prophet-Founder is acknowledged, the question of which moral standards do I follow and why becomes non-existent. The believer strives to follow faithfully the revealed standards of God as pronounced by the Prophet. The crucial question then is how do we recognize the truth of the Prophet-Founder? The capacity to recognize this truth is deemed by Religion to be potentially residing in all of us.[15] This capacity however, remains a potentiality until we choose to investigate this truth and undertake its necessary search for ourselves. The choice to seek out the truth is given to us and that choice has to be exercised by ourselves - nobody else can do it for us. For those who decide to undertake that investigation or search, ardour is a needed quality[16] - a lackadaisical, semi-hearted attempt will be foredoomed to failure. Another extremely important prerequisite is that our hearts and minds must be open, unprejudiced and freed from all forms of

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[15] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 143.

[16] Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 7.

attachments,[17] and continual exercises of honest and even courageous self-reflection are needed for the seeker to be in this state.

In such a spirit of search, the truth of the Divine Messengers is established by exploring the life history of the Prophet Founders and by studying Their revealed words.

"Say: The first and foremost testimony establishing His truth is His own Self. Next to this testimony is His Revelation. For whoso faileth to recognize either the one or the other, He hath established the words He hath revealed as proof of His reality and truth."[18]

Thus for us who are not in a position to witness the Prophets directly in Their process of Revelation, the only recourse available to us to determine Their truth are the historical accounts of Their lives and, where available, Their revealed Words of God. What always features prominently in a fair-minded reading of the life history of the Prophets is the degree of personal sacrifice (in some instances, to the point of death) They endured for the sake of upholding the truth of God's Revelation for humanity and it is precisely this sacrifice and the reasons for the sacrifice that the seeker has to contemplate upon. With reference to the Word of God, it is Religion's singular claim that the Word of God has special powers capable of inspiring and transforming the inner spirit of the true seeker. Thus the interaction of the seeker with the Prophet-Founder's revealed words coupled with a knowledge of His life and sufferings, all in the spirit of the seeker's humility, openness and detachment, would be sufficient for the seeker to make a decision about the truth or falsehood of the Central Figure. The fact that many, for all sorts of reasons, still will not or choose not to recognize this truth of the Prophets is itself recognized by Religion. The onset of the spiritual journey (which begins with the belief in the Prophet - at least in this earthly life) is deemed by Religion to come to different people at different points in time (and it need not be during this existence either). The nonbelievers are left to their own devices, and discord or disagreement with them is forbidden to those who would claim themselves to be believers of Religion. In fact, for the believers, many

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[17] Bahá'u'lláh, Kitáb-I-Íqán, p. 192.

[18] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings form the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 105.

tasks await them, all centering around the realities of moral commitment.

Moral Commitment

I have tried to explain how the recognition of the truth of the Prophet-Founder is the religious justification for morality. The recommended approach for determining this truth (reading and reflecting on the Prophet's life history as well as His revealed Word of God) has also been touched upon and it will be realized that this judgement of truth requires from the seeker both his reasoning faculty as well as what can crudely be termed as his feeling for truth. As the final part of today's talk, we will look at moral commitment and Religion's influence on it. Earlier, the progressive weakening of the "moral will" in many of today's societies was depicted and linked to moral relativism as well as an individual's psychological preference for freedom and inclination towards self-centredness. Let us see now what Religion's solutions to these challenges are.

The clearest reason for moral commitment is again linked to the truth of the Prophet. As the Bahá'í Writings make clear, recognition of that truth enjoins upon the seeker a two-fold obligation: steadfastness in his belief and obedience to the laws as revealed in Religion.

"In this Day whosoever is guided...to...the station of recognizing the Source of divine commandments and the Dayspring of His Revelation, hath everlastingly attained unto all good. Having reached this lofty station a twofold obligation rested upon every soul. One is to be steadfast in the Cause... The other is observance of the divine ordinances which have streamed forth from the wellspring of His heavenly-propelled Pen. For man's knowledge of God cannot develop fully and adequately safe by observing whatsoever hath been ordained by Him and is set forth in His heavenly Book."[19]

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[19] Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 268.

In other words, recognition of the Prophet-Founder's status, in addition to justifying and making clear the moral standards, also means commitment to a moral lifestyle. But Religion also offers other perspectives that are linked to moral commitment.

The central challenge of a moral lifestyle is that it demands that we go beyond the pursuit of self-interests, that we actively work towards the fulfillment of others' needs. While this may certainly have the potential to effect excellence in one's character, that excellence may not necessarily (especially, in the short-run) result in any tangible benefits. However, it is such material success that most of us are caught up with, that gives our life direction and meaning, and its overwhelming importance is the fundamental message that secular societies passes onto all their citizens.

How Religion transcends this challenge is in educating its adherents that what they deem to be this life is not the only reality, that over and beyond this life, there is another, Ultimate Reality; and in relation to this Ultimate Reality, moral excellence, and not earthly success, constitutes the true (albeit long-term) victory. There is nothing wrong with earthly success or its related striving as long as it is accomplished through moral excellence, as a result of which the believer is inwardly detached from such attainments. As MacIntyre has pointed out, from early historical times there has been an awareness that both virtue and victory are facets of excellence that human beings are inclined to strive towards, and the pursuit of one can certainly collide with the demands of the other.[20] Religion's answer to this dilemma is clear: the acquisition of virtues must always be given priority over the pursuit of worldly achievements.

However, detachment is one topic that is extremely easy to talk about, compared to its actual practice. As stated above, the Religious perspective is that this earthly life is not truly the ultimate reality since everything around us is impermanent, transient and fleeting - be they relationships, possessions or responsibilities: the "changes and chances of life".[21] It would thus be foolish to set our hearts on, and overwhelm our minds with what is intrinsically a transitory life. However, such an

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[20] MacIntyre A., *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, pp. 30-46.

[21] Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 258.

inner reorientation is radically at odds with conventional social perspectives. All around, people hunger for riches, fame and power but without reflecting on the impermanence and instability of these goals: I may finally be able to attain my dream-level of wealth, fame and power, but can I be sure that tomorrow these will still remain with me? In a nutshell, practising spiritual detachment will certainly bring the individual beyond the established pursuits and beliefs of modern society.

Yet neither should detachment be understood to mean negation of life and withdrawal from the manifold duties or responsibilities that it throws in our direction. As contemporary Religion would have it, no longer can the believer practise detachment by leading an ascetic life. Thus detachment is not to be understood as an external deprivation of sorts - it is, in essence, an inner re-orientation and there is therefore nothing wrong about experiencing happiness or being wealthy while adopting a moral lifestyle, so long as the individual does not become attached to that happiness or wealth. Participation in life is extremely important to be able to attain one of the central goals of Religion: to be of service to mankind. In fact, if the purpose of life as defined by Religion is the acquisition of virtues, then the reason for that acquisition is for us to be better able to serve mankind and any such service demands an immersion into, and involvement with, one's society.

What is interesting then in the practice of an ethical lifestyle is the juxtapositioning of love (or service) and detachment. There appears to be an apparent tension or paradox in these two concepts. Conventionally, one associates love with attachment and detachment with the contrary. But I believe the love that Religion envisages is something quite different from what we ordinarily understand the word to mean. This love or compassion is the natural expression of our inner love of God and it is non-possessive. The way in which concomitant detachment makes this love-state different from the conventional love-state is that truly nothing is expected in return. There are no calculations. The question "What's in it for me?" becomes meaningless and non-existent. These are some of the features of the moral standards that Religion enjoins its adherents to have, and be committed to.

The above explications about detachment only make clearer the significant difficulties of its practice. Thus the spiritual individual

cannot escape the experience of a profound aloneness when striving to practise a detached ethical lifestyle which runs counter to current social norms. The only way of preventing that aloneness from becoming a negative loneliness is again in the sincere practice of detachment in the first place. But this still does not remove the difficulty of becoming spiritually detached. However, Religion has an answer to this difficulty and it resides in the experience of the love of God.[22] It is this love that will inspire and empower an individual to undertake ethical detachment and still remain psychologically integrated and healthy. At the practical level, this love of God translates into love or compassion for our fellow beings for the sake of God, the Creator of all. And it is this experience of love or compassion that generates a feeling of lightness or gentleness to what could otherwise be a severely austere lifestyle of obedience to ethical rules and detachment from secular demands.

So far under the topic of moral commitment we have discussed how it naturally follows from the initial step of recognizing the truth of the Prophet-Founder. Moreover, the difficulties of leading a moral lifestyle in the midst of secular societies were touched upon, emphasizing in the process, the importance of detachment and compassion and their apparent conceptual tensions. Throughout the discussion we have briefly mentioned how for moral commitment to be realistic and fruitful, and how for detachment and compassion to be practised healthily and meaningfully, the underlying inspiration of the love of God is crucial. What remains now, as the last part of today's talk, is to address the issue of how this love of God can come about in all of us.

In answering this question, we should also reflect upon how unique Religion is, compared to all other branches of human knowledge in effecting changes in moral behaviour. All other relevant disciplines can only, at best, describe ethical behaviour, they cannot motivate, inspire or transform. Even psychology, which comes closest to this task, is essentially descriptive of the humanistic importance of leading an other-oriented as compared to a self-oriented lifestyle; its prescriptive scope, on the other hand, is very limited and where it exists, is primarily cognitive in nature, lacking inspiration. Religion, however, clearly and boldly states that spiritual transformation is a potential reality in all of us

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[22] 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 301.

and that the starting point of this transformation is the knowledge of God which, as described earlier, is tantamount to the knowledge of the Prophet-Founder, and in particular, the revealed Word of God. It is Religion's singular claim and promise that as long as an individual, with openness, sincerity and courage, interacts with the Word of God, the Writings will inspire and transform the seeker and create within him the mysterious love of God.

"Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth..."[23]

"Is it within human power... to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish... the Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change"[24]

"The words of Bahá'u'lláh... have a creative power and are sure to awaken in the reader the undying fire of the love of God."[25]

The individual thus becomes inspired and motivated to turn away from his self and to turn towards God because of the Beauty of God. The extent to which this love can be attained in our lives varies from one to another, dependent on the earnestness of our endeavours as well as His Grace. To then maintain this transformed state or even grow further, we are required to daily interact with the Word of God through prayers and meditations and put into sincere practice divine ordinances. In this way, by inspiration, faith and deeds, the individual's moral commitment becomes strengthened.

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[23] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings form the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, , p. 141.

[24] Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings form the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 200.

[25] On behalf of Shoghi Effendi, *The Importance of Deepening Our Knowledge and Understanding of the Faith*, pp. 34-35.

Conclusion

This presentation has described the missing moral dimension in many of our individual and social endeavors and has ascribed the phenomenon to the downfall of the true practice of spirituality, a downfall precipitated by the corrupt past practices of Religion as well as an unwarranted conviction about man's intellectual capabilities. Also central to this paper is the belief that for moral recovery to be effected realistically and lastingly, Religion has to be reinstated to a central position in the lives of both individuals and society. Admittedly, this can only be if both the structure and functioning of religious institutions are different from the past (without altering the spiritual content of love) so as to ensure that its historical errors will never be repeated.

However, even the above-described repositioning of Religion cannot, by itself, reinvigorate our current moral climate. Such re-energizing can only occur if we ourselves are prepared to practise the true precepts of Religion. Thus we ourselves must want and be ready to be transformed, become progressively less self-centered and more compassionate towards others, in thoughts as well as deeds. Only then can the empowering influence of Religion be realized. Of course, the need for Religion has been approached in this paper from the standpoint of today's withering moral dimension, but ultimately, the truth of Religion can never be determined this way. That ascertainment, by necessity, will have to come at a more personal level and it requires from the seeker a willingness to undertake an independent and unbiased search for truth. Aspects of such a search and its end points (knowledge and love of God) have also been briefly addressed in this presentation.

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inadequacies are the author's responsibility; all I can say is that this work could have been far worse.

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