

Churches, Religions, Bioethics

The Positions of the Austrian Churches and Religious Communities regarding bio- and medico-ethical Issues

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translated from the German

Bahá'í

The Bahá'í Faith is the youngest of the revealed religions. It is described by scholars as a “post-Islamic world religion, or as a “new world religion”. This religion, which was founded in the 19th century and arose out of the Islamic cultural background, is a religion in the tradition of the Abrahamic prophetic religions. Its herald, the Báb (1819-1850) announced the central figure, Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892). In him the Bahá'ís see the eschatological turning point in history: The Adamic cycle in which the great religions arose is ended, the day of “Resurrection” is come, a new cycle has started. In Bahá'u'lláh the Bahá'ís see the promises of the world religions concerning the coming of a world renewer at the end of time fulfilled.

The central theme of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is the idea of unity, which is met with at three levels: in the unity of God, in the mystical unity of the religions and in the unity of humankind. The theological pivot of the Bahá'í teachings is the new paradigm in the history of salvation, “progressive revelation”: God reveals himself to men in accordance with their power of understanding. The great religions are thus not mere *participations* in truth but divine foundations. Their holy books are testimonies of truth, ultimately they all come from the same source.

The Bahá'í Faith is the most widespread religion geographically after Christianity. The approximately 67 million believers live – apart from the country of its origin, Iran – mostly in the Third World. In Austria the Bahá'ís have been a state-incorporated religious community in accordance with BekGG since 11 July 1998.

The wealth of original texts available in the Bahá'í Faith has been translated into western languages to only a small degree and has been little researched. It is therefore due especially to the efforts of Dr. Udo Schaefer that the positions of the Bahá'ís on bioethical and biomedical questions can be presented; Dr. Schaefer has become known as the author of several

publications on Bahá'í ethics, and he is at present writing a comprehensive presentation on this subject.⁹

Fundamental questions

Sources for making decisions

The source for making decisions on ethics is the entire (by no means completed) canon of writings, i.e. the authentic texts from the pen of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Complementary to this are the writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi, the "Guardian of the Cause of God", who both had the function of authoritative interpretation: it was incumbent on them to interpret the revealed teachings authoritatively. With the death of Shoghi Effendi authoritative interpretation came to an end.

Authorities for making decisions

The responsibility for making a decision on ethical issues rests first of all with the individual believer, who orients his ethical action in accordance with the revealed writings and in doing so is responsible only to his own conscience and to God. The legal institutions of the community, to which the believers owe obedience, are not entitled to make any authoritative interpretation of ethics. Supplementary legislation to the revealed law is entrusted to the supreme directing council, the "Universal House of Justice" – an institution consisting at present of 9 members with its seat in Haifa, which is elected by the world community. This institution is responsible for legislation in all matters on which the revelation is silent. The charisma of infallibility conferred on this institution for the area of legislation raises the law made by it to the level of the revealed law. The community is thus in the possession of a religious law consisting of the *ius divinum positivum* (sacred writings) and the *ius divinum complementum* (law set by the Universal House of Justice). The legal norms set by this institution may have ethical implications, i.e. they are binding upon the conscience of the individual. Concretely that means, for instance, that the establishment of legal norms on the complex of bioethical questions would also have relevance for the individual's decision of conscience.

Relationship to the revealed religion

Since bioethical and biomedical questions affect man in his essential nature, and since the latter is a central part of the revelation, there is an immediate relationship to the revealed religion.

⁹ Cordial thanks to the representatives of the Bahá'ís and to Dr. jur. Udo Schaefer for their efforts to give their position on questions of bioethics and medical ethics.

Anthropological foundation

Image of man

Bahá'u'lláh's image of man shows many analogies to the image of man of the Abrahamic world religions. According to the teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, man is God's mystery, "the noblest and most perfect of all created things",¹⁰ "chosen to be God's image*", his "likeness", his "representative" on earth. Man is the purpose and culmination of creation and has been created to "know and worship God". He should know himself and should achieve victory over his carnal self and become perfect. Of all creatures, man alone has an eternal soul, which comes into existence at the moment of conception and survives beyond his earthly existence: "We are God's, and to Him shall we return."

The idea of reincarnation is not accepted. The continuance of life beyond death takes place in other worlds of God, not on earth. The hereafter is not a kind of soul bank for this world. The transcendental importance of human action is shown beyond the threshold of death, when man stands before God's judgment-seat. Life in this world is a preparation for our future life.

Health and Sickness

The body of man, his "physical frame", is "the throne of the inner temple". Therefore it should be treated and preserved with great respect. When even a dead body is to be treated with the utmost "honour and respect", this applies also to the foetus.

The believer is morally obligated to preserve his health and avoid anything that may harm and ruin it. Thus, for instance, the smoking of tobacco is not forbidden, but it is branded as "repugnant", "an evil habit", and "deprecated in the sight of God as abhorrent, filthy in the extreme; and, albeit by degrees, highly injurious to health". In addition to purity of heart, which is demanded in all religions, great value is also placed on physical cleanliness. *Latafah* (Refinement, culturedness, cleanliness) is altogether a key term in the ethics of Bahá'u'lláh. Great importance is attached to a healthy way of living and healthy nutrition.

Illness is not a punishment – even saints became sick – but it may very well be a test visited by God on man for the sake of his spiritual well-being, his spiritual progress and his perfection. The healing of a sick person can happen

¹⁰ The quotations are from the sacred writings of the Bahá'í Faith, among them the "Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh"; Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas; Selections from the Writings of the Báb.

* [This article erroneously says "Spiel", meaning game or play, instead of "Spiegel", meaning image or mirror – cf. copy of the original paper by Dr. Schaefer, on which this article is based.]

in a spiritual manner; Bahá'u'lláh has revealed a number of healing prayers for this purpose. Healing thus has a spiritual dimension, as expressed by the etymological relationship between “*Heilung*” [healing] and “*Heil*” [salvation]. Bahá'u'lláh stressed the importance of prayer for healing but he did not advocate any particular method of healing.

Shoghi Effendi writes on this point: “There is no such thing as Bahá'í healers or a Bahá'í type of healing. In His Most Holy Book (the Aqdas) Bahá'u'lláh says to consult the best physicians, in other words, doctors who have studied a scientific system of medicine; he never gave us to believe that He himself would heal us through ‘healers’, but rather through prayer and the assistance of medicine and approved treatments.”

Bahá'u'lláh commands succinctly: “Resort ye, in times of sickness, to competent physicians.” By so doing, he rejected the tendencies arising repeatedly in the history of religion of having a low opinion of scientific medicine and seeking healing for sick people exclusively in spiritual practices. The competent physician (not the quack) is highly regarded. He may even allow the use of alcoholic beverages or certain drugs that are forbidden to the believers, if this is medically indicated.

People's affliction by illness is also dependent on progress in mankind's civilisation. At an unpredictable future time, in which the illness-producing factors, extreme poverty and misery will have been overcome, it is promised that science and medicine will reach such a high standard that a healthy state in people will be the predominant condition.

Liberty and responsibility

Man's liberty, together with his reason and his dignity, are among his fundamental anthropological equipment. Despite his genetic and social determinants, he has some latitude for free decision-making and action. The biological human sciences' deterministic image of man, which reduces him to his biological nature, has been rejected. With liberty, man is also given responsibility. He must account for his actions before the supreme judge. It is therefore not immaterial how man lives, because in accordance with his earthly life reward and punishment will be meted out to him in the hereafter.

The complexes of bioethical questions

The beginning of human life

Human life, and with it the eternal soul, begins at conception. A legal definition of this concept is not found in the writings. It is thus not yet clarified whether the decisive moment for the beginning of life and the soul's

coming into existence is the fusion of the egg and the sperm or the “nidation” [implantation of the fertilised egg in the mucous membrane of the womb].

Problems surrounding in-vitro fertilisation

There is no ban on in-vitro fertilisation, on condition that the sperm is from the husband and not from a third party or a sperm-bank; because according to the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh marriage is the sole place where the procreation of descendants legitimately takes place.

Cloning (therapeutically/reproductively)

There are no binding statements on cloning. Regarded from the point of view of the Bahá’í image of man and the theology of creation on which the writings are based, reproductive cloning appears to be a forbidden interference in God’s order of creation.

The artificial production of a human being for therapeutic purposes, that is with the intention of cannibalising it for spare parts, is incompatible with Bahá’u’lláh’s normative image of man and human dignity. Even therapeutic cloning with embryonic stem cells encounters serious reservations, while therapeutic cloning with adult stem cells appears to be unproblematic.

Pre-natal/ pre-implementation diagnostics

Neither has the question of pre-implementation diagnostics been clarified so far. Such diagnostics encounter serious reservations, because it opens the way for social-Darwinistic selection.

Stem cell research (embryonic, adult)

While adult embryonic stem cell research seems unproblematic, embryonic stem cell research is problematic because of the unclarified question of when human life begins.

The problems of the bioethical complex of questions are subjects that will at some time be settled for the Bahá’ís through supplementary legislation by the Universal House of Justice, but an establishment of legal norms is not expected for some time to come. Until such a time the believers are referred to their own conscience. They are obligated not to make dogmatic statements and not to give their own understanding of the subject as Bahá’í teaching.

The complexes of medical-ethical questions

Protection of life at the beginning (pregnancy conflicts)

The primary purpose of marriage is the procreation of descendants who succeed one another through the generations to serve, revere and worship God. Nothing is mentioned in the holy writings about birth control. The decision not to have any children is, however, incompatible with the purpose of marriage. Since the human soul comes into existence at procreation, a termination of pregnancy just for the sake of avoiding an unwanted pregnancy is forbidden in every case.

As to the question of what kinds of cases would make an abortion legally and ethically permissible, nothing can be found in the writings about it. The Universal House of Justice has so far not made any legal rulings and will not do so for the time being. Until this question is settled legally, every believer has to decide in accordance with his conscience. The so-called “medical indication” does not seem to pose a problem: when an abortion is the only means of preserving the health or the life of the mother, the life of the mother takes precedence over the “nasciturus” [embryo].

Values in the doctor-patient relationship

The central ethical values for the relationship between doctor and patient are honesty on the part of the doctor and trust on the part of the patient in the doctor’s skill and person. In his “Tablet to a Physician”, Bahá’u’lláh praises the art of healing as the “most meritorious of all sciences”, as a means given by God for the well-being of man. The text contains some prescriptions for medical treatment, for example to initially treat the patient through diet and resort to medications only when dietary treatment proved unsuccessful. Bahá’u’lláh emphasises that contentment under all circumstances is conducive to health, that grief and sorrow harm health, that jealousy consumes the body and anger burns the liver. According to these texts the doctor, before treating the patient, should first turn to God and seek his assistance. A physician who is filled with the love of God exerts such an influence that his mere visit will be conducive to healing the patient.

Protecting life at the end (debate on euthanasia)

The holy writings are silent on the question of euthanasia. It has to be assumed that God, who has given life, must also dispose its end. Man is forbidden to commit suicide. For the physician this means that euthanasia or assisted suicide is not permitted ethically. The so-called “*passive* euthanasia” (the avoidance of life-prolonging or life-preserving measures, particularly attempted revival, in accordance with the declared will of the patient) seems unobjectionable ethically. Beyond this it is again the case that, as long as the Universal House of Justice has not legislated on this question, every individual must decide in accordance with his conscience.

Positions of the Faith on State biological and health policies

The Bahá'í religious community would like to suggest that State health policies should orient themselves by the following goals:

Man should not be considered merely as a biological entity, as a purely animal, material being but as a material-spiritual being with inherent dignity.

Accordingly, a medical system should be demanded in which the well-being of the patient has absolute priority over questions of economy, over an unbridled search for knowledge and feasibility. Apparatus-medicine at any price is incompatible with these demands.

Characterisation of positions from an ethical point of view

Apart from the great dedication with which Bahá'ís take part in the discourse on bioethics and medical ethics, their positions are important for several reasons:

First of all, the Bahá'í Faith is a very young religion that absorbs traditional elements from other religions and combines them with views from the modern world; this is shown, for example, in its open, but nevertheless critical, understanding in relation to (modern) medicine.

Secondly, the Bahá'í Faith, compared to dominant Christianity, is a foreign religion in the West. Despite this the Bahá'ís, because of their openness to other religious traditions, seem to be a particularly good partner for dialogue, making the strange, eastern world of belief clearer to western understanding.

The ethical positions of the Bahá'ís are characterised by the polarity of the “personal moral conscience of the individual” on the one hand and “binding ethical norms” (represented by the revelation and the authoritative decisions by the Universal House of Justice) on the other; a similarity with, for example, the Catholic situation, cannot therefore be denied.

In making decisions, the value of human dignity is central for the Bahá'ís; thus they move not just within a western Kantian philosophy but also within the modern legal and constitutional State.

As for all other religious communities, it is also important to the Bahá'ís that man should not be reduced to a “biological machine” but that he should be comprehended in his bodily-spiritual wholeness. This is shown also in the suggestions and wishes of the religious community in regard to State health policy.

The dedication to and intensive preoccupation of the Bahá'ís with ethical questions and problems should in no way remain unused for a societal discourse; rather it is admirable from the point of view of state church law how such a (numerically) small religious community makes its contribution to civil society in the solution of current problems.