

## THE SECONDARY TEACHINGS OF THE RELIGION OF GOD \*

*The eternal Religion of God is made up of two parts, the one being the fundamental, the spiritual, the essential teachings and ordinances, and the other being the secondary, the material, the accidental instructions and laws. This dual character of the divine Word was explained by 'Abdu'l Baha on a number of occasions, and recorded in Utterances:18-19; SAQ:55 57; PUP:97 98,106,168,338 39,364 66,393,445. This truth was also affirmed by Shoghi Effendi in a number of his letters, including in GTT:2,118,129. Separate studies are devoted to a)the essential and b)the secondary teachings and ordinances of the Religion of God, citing examples from the extant Scriptures associated with various of the Prophets of God. Yet another study examines the secondary teachings and laws of Baha'u'llah, those which are specific to this Age and Cycle, which pertain to the outward life of humankind at this time in its evolution.*

*This study will examine the secondary teachings of the Religion of God, as discussed in the addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Baha, from 1901, 1904-1906 and 1912. The first of these talks was given on 24 November 1901, in which the Master explained:*

"The law and commandments are divided into two branches, spiritual teachings and corporeal or material teachings...

"The material teachings, those which distinguish lawful from unlawful things, change according to the exigency of the times, because circumstances and conditions are not always the same." (*Utterances of Abdul Beha Abbas to two young men, American pilgrims to Acre, 1901; New York: The Board of Counsel, 1902, p. 18-19*)

*In the years 1904-1906, Laura Clifford Barney, a prominent American believer, visited 'Abdu'l-Baha in the Holy Land. She asked Him many questions, carefully transcribed his answers, and, after submitting these notes for His corrections, published the collection, simultaneously in Persian and in English translation, under the title "Some Answered Questions." In one of those talks, 'Abdu'l-Baha elaborates on this subject:*

"...the law of God is divided into two parts; one is the fundamental basis which comprises all spiritual things...

"These divine qualities, these eternal commandments, will never be abolished; nay, they will last and will be established for ever and ever. These virtues of humanity will be renewed in each of

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the different cycles; for at the end of every cycle the spiritual Law of God, that is to say the human virtues, disappears, and only the form subsists.

"Thus among the Jews, at the end of the cycle of Moses which coincides with the Christian manifestation, the Law of God disappeared, only a form without spirit remaining. The Holy of Holies departed from amongst them; but the outer court of Jerusalem--which is the expression used for the form of the religion--fell into the hands of the Gentiles. In the same way the fundamental principles of the religion of Christ, which are the greatest virtues of humanity, have disappeared, and its form has remained in the hands of the clergy and the priests. Likewise the foundation of the religion of Muhammad has disappeared, but its form remains in the hands of the official Ulama...

"The second part of the Religion of God, which refers to the material world, and which comprises fasting, prayer, forms of worship, marriage, and divorce, the abolition of slavery, legal processes, transactions, indemnities for murder, violence, theft, and injuries, this part of the Law of God which refers to material things, is modified and altered in each prophetic cycle in accordance with the necessities of the times." (SAQ:XI:55,56,56-57)

*In public and private addresses alike, 'Abdu'l-Baha returned repeatedly to this theme during his trips to Europe and North America, in 1911, 1912-1913. While "Paris Talks" and "Abdu'l-Baha on Divine Philosophy," both of which were compiled from His European addresses, contain allusions to this theme, "The Promulgation of Universal Peace" has a number of explicit references thereto. In all of these sources, 'Abdu'l-Baha begins by affirming that there are two parts, branches, aspects, functions, kinds, divisions to the law of God:*

"The cause of this fellowship and unity lies in the fact that the divine law has two distinct aspects or functions: one the essential or fundamental, the other material or accidental...The second function of the divine religion deals with material conditions, the laws of human intercourse and social regulation. These are subject to change and transformation in accordance with the time, place and conditions. The essential ordinances of religion were the same during the time of Abraham, the day of Moses and the cycle of Jesus, but the accidental or material laws were abrogated and superseded according to the exigency and requirement of each succeeding age. For example, in the law of Moses there were ten distinct commandments in regard to murder, which were revealed according to the requirement and capacity of the people, but in the day of Jesus these were abrogated and superseded in conformity with the changed and advanced human conditions." (PUP:97-98)

"Each of the divine religions embodies two kinds of ordinances...

"The second kind of ordinances in the divine religions is those which relate to the material affairs of humankind. These are the material or accidental laws which are subject to change in

each day of manifestation, according to the exigencies of the time, conditions and differing capacities of humanity. For instance, in the day of Moses ten commandments in regard to murder were revealed by Him. These commandments were in accordance with the requirements of that day and time. Other laws embodying drastic punishments were enacted by Moses--an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. The penalty for theft was amputation of the hand. These laws and penalties were applicable to the degree of the Israelitish people of that period, who dwelt in the wilderness and desert under conditions where severity was necessary and justifiable. But in the time of Jesus Christ this kind of law was not expedient; therefore, Christ abrogated and superseded the commands of Moses.

"In brief, every one of the divine religions contains essential ordinances, which are not subject to change, and material ordinances, which are abrogated according to the exigencies of time." *(PUP:106)*

"The religions of God have the same foundation, but the dogmas appearing later have differed. Each of the divine religions has two aspects...The second aspect of the divine religions is nonessential. It concerns human needs and undergoes change in every cycle according to the exigency of the time. For example, in the time of Moses divorce was conformable to the needs and conditions; Moses, therefore, established it. But in the time of Christ, divorces were numerous and the cause of corruption; as they were not suitable for the time, he made divorce unlawful and likewise changed other laws. These are needs and conditions which have to do with the conduct of society; therefore, they undergo change according to the exigency of the time. Moses dwelt in the desert. As there were no penitentiaries, no means of restitution in the desert and wilderness, the laws of God were an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. Could this be carried out now? If a man destroys another man's eye, are you willing to destroy the eye of the offender? If a man's teeth are broken or his ear cut off, will you demand a corresponding mutilation of his assailant? This would not be conformable to conditions of humanity at the present time. If a man steals, shall his hand be cut off? This punishment was just and right in the law of Moses, but it was applicable to the desert, where there were no prisons and reformatory institutions of later and higher forms of government. Today you have government and organization, a police system, a judge and trial by jury. The punishment and penalty is now different. Therefore, the nonessentials which deal with details of community are changed according to the exigency of the time and conditions." *(PUP:168,169)*

"Each one of the divine religions has established two kinds of ordinances: the essential and the accidental...The accidental laws concern the administration of outer human actions and relations, establishing rules and regulations requisite for the world of bodies and their control. These are ever subject to change and supersedure according to the exigencies of time, place and condition. For example, during the time of Moses, ten commandments concerning the punishment of murder were revealed in His Book. Divorce was sanctioned and polygamy

allowable to a certain extent. If a man committed theft, his hand was cut off. This was drastic law and severe punishment applicable to the time of Moses. But when the time of Christ came, minds had developed, realizations were keener and spiritual perceptions had advanced so that certain laws concerning murder, plurality of wives and divorce were abrogated. But the essential ordinances of the Mosaic dispensation remained unchanged...Briefly, the foundation of the divine religions is one eternal foundation, but the laws for temporary conditions and exigencies are subject to change. Therefore, by adherence to these temporary laws, blindly following and imitating ancestral forms, difference and divergence have arisen among followers of the various religions, resulting in disunion, strife and hatred. Blind imitations and dogmatic observances are conducive to alienation and disagreement; they lead to bloodshed and destruction of the foundations of humanity. Therefore, the religionists of the world must lay aside these imitations and investigate the essential foundation or reality itself, which is not subject to change or transformation. This is the divine means of agreement and unification."  
*(PUP:338-339)*

"Furthermore, we wish to establish the point that the foundations of the religions of God are one foundation. This foundation is not multiple, for it is reality itself. Reality does not admit of multiplicity, although each of the divine religions is separable into two divisions...

"The second classification or division comprises social laws and regulations applicable to human conduct. This is not the essential spiritual quality of religion. It is subject to change and transformation according to the exigencies and requirements of time and place. For instance, in the time of Noah certain requirements made it necessary that all seafood be allowable or lawful. During the time of the Abrahamic Prophethood it was considered allowable, because of a certain exigency, that a man should marry his aunt, even as Sarah was the sister of Abraham's mother. During the cycle of Adam it was lawful and expedient for a man to marry his own sister, even as Abel, Cain and Seth, the sons of Adam, married their sisters. But in the law of the Pentateuch revealed by Moses these marriages were forbidden and their custom and sanction abrogated. Other laws formerly valid were annulled during the time of Moses. For example, it was lawful in Abraham's cycle to eat the flesh of the camel, but during the time of Jacob this was prohibited. Such changes and transformations in the teaching of religion are applicable to the ordinary conditions of life, but they are not important or essential. Moses lived in the wilderness of Sinai where crime necessitated direct punishment. There were no penitentiaries or penalties of imprisonment. Therefore, according to the exigency of the time and place it was a law of God that an eye should be given for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. It would not be practicable to enforce this law at the present time--for instance, to blind a man who accidentally blinded you. In the Torah there are many commands concerning the punishment of a murderer. It would not be allowable or possible to carry out these ordinances today. Human conditions and exigencies are such that even the question of capital punishment--the one penalty which most nations

have continued to enforce for murder--is now under discussion by wise men who are debating its advisability. In fact, laws for the ordinary conditions of life are only valid temporarily. The exigencies of the time of Moses justified cutting off a man's hand for theft, but such a penalty is not allowable now. Time changes conditions, and laws change to suit conditions. We must remember that these changing laws are not the essentials; they are the accidentals of religion. The essential ordinances established by a Manifestation of God are spiritual; they concern moralities, the ethical development of man and faith in God. They are ideal and necessarily permanent--expressions of the one foundation and not amenable to change or transformation. Therefore, the fundamental basis of the revealed religion of God is immutable, unchanging throughout the centuries, not subject to the varying conditions of the human world."  
*(Khatirat:610-621/PUP:364, 365-366)*

"For example, each of the divine religions contains two kinds of laws or ordinances. One division concerns the world of morality and ethical institutions...

"The second division comprises laws and institutions which provide for human needs and conditions according to exigencies of time and place. These are accidental, of no essential importance and should never have been made the cause and source of human contention. For example, during the time of Moses--upon Him be peace!--according to the exigencies of that period, divorce was permissible. During the cycle of Christ, inasmuch as divorce was not in conformity with the time and conditions, Jesus Christ abrogated it. In the cycle of Moses, plurality of wives was permissible. But during the time of Christ, the exigency which had sanctioned it did not exist; therefore, it was forbidden. Moses lived in the wilderness and desert of Sinai; therefore, His ordinances and commandments were in conformity with those conditions. The penalty for theft was to cut off a man's hand. An ordinance of this kind was in keeping with desert life but is not compatible with conditions of the present day. Such ordinances, therefore, constitute the second or nonessential division of the divine religions and are not of importance, for they deal with human transactions which are ever changing according to the requirements of time and place." *(PUP:393-394)*

"Let me ask your closest attention in considering this subject. The divine religions embody two kinds of ordinances...

"Second, there are laws and ordinances which are temporary and nonessential. These concern human transactions and relations. They are accidental and subject to change according to the exigencies of time and place. These ordinances are neither permanent nor fundamental. For instance, during the time of Noah it was expedient that seafood be considered as lawful; therefore, God commanded Noah to partake of all marine animal life. During the time of Moses this was no in accordance with the exigencies of Israel's existence; therefore, a second command was revealed partly abrogating the law concerning marine foods. During the time of

Abraham--upon Him be peace!--camel's milk was considered a lawful and acceptable food; likewise, the flesh of the camel; but during Jacob's time, because of a certain vow He made, this became unlawful. These are nonessential, temporary laws. In the Holy Bible there are certain commandments which according to those bygone times constituted the very spirit of the age, the very light of that period. For example, according to the law of the Torah if a man committed theft of a certain amount, they cut off his hand. Is it practicable and reasonable in this present day to cut off a man's hand for the theft of a dollar? In the Torah there are ten ordinances concerning murder. Could these be made effective today? Unquestionably no; times have changed. According to the explicit text of the Bible if a man should change or break the law of the Sabbath or if he should touch fire on the Sabbath, he must be killed. Today such a law is abrogated. The Torah declares that if a man should speak a disrespectful word to his father, he should suffer the penalty of death. Is this possible of enforcement now? No; human conditions have undergone changes. Likewise, during the time of Christ certain minor ordinances conformable to that period were enforced...The accidental, or nonessential, laws which regulate the transactions of the social body and everyday affairs of life are changeable and subject to abrogation." (*PUP:403,404,405*)

"The teachings and ordinances of the divine religions are of two kinds...The second kind of ordinances and teachings concern the outer conditions and transactions of the world of mankind. They are the nonessential, accidental or temporary laws of human affairs which are subject to change and transformation according to the exigencies of time and place. For instance, during the time of Moses divorce was permitted, but in the time of Christ it was made unlawful. In the Torah there are ten commandments concerning retribution for murder, which would not be possible to enforce at the present time and under existing conditions of the world. Therefore, these non-essential, temporary laws are superseded and abrogated to suit the exigencies and requirements of successive periods.

"But the followers of the divine religions have turned away from the principles and ordinances which are essential and unchanging in the Word of God, forsaking those fundamental realities which have to do with the life of the human world, the eternal life--such as the love of God, faith in God, philanthropy, knowledge, spiritual perception, divine guidance--holding these to be contingent and nonessential while wrangling and disagreeing over such questions as whether divorce is lawful or unlawful, or whether this or that observance of a minor law is orthodox and true. The Jews consider divorce lawful; the Catholic Christians deem it unlawful; the outcome is discord and hostility between them. If they would investigate the one fundamental reality underlying the laws revealed by Moses and Christ, this condition of hatred and misunderstanding would be dispelled and divine unity prevail." (*PUP:445*)

"The second part is inessential. It belongs to practical life, to transactions and business, and changes according to the requirements of the time of each prophet. These moral laws are the reflex [reflections] on this plane of the divine laws, and they become the medium for transmuting the thought of man into his reality. The moral laws change as the horizon of man extends.

"For example, during the days of His Holiness Moses, the foundation and the origin of the religion of God spelled morality, and that was not changed in the Christian dispensation, but certain differences crept in through the change of the second part of the religion. For during the Mosaic period the hand of a person was cut off in punishment of a small theft; there was the law of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. This was according to the spirit of the age, but as these laws were impracticable at the time of Christ, they were abrogated. Likewise divorce had become so universal and so easily put into practice, that there remained no fixed laws of marriage, therefore His Holiness Christ forbade it.

"According to the exigencies of the time, His Holiness Moses revealed ten laws for capital punishment. It was impossible at that time to protect the community and preserve social security without these severe measures, for the children of Israel lived in the wilderness of Tah [Sinai], and they could not protect their rights and establish safety without these severe measures. But they were not needed in the time of Christ, and were abolished. The difference in the second part of religion is unimportant because it belongs to the customs of life only but the foundation of the religion is one, and His Holiness Bahá'u'lláh has renewed that foundation. The cause of Christ was wholly spiritual. He did not change anything save the Sabbath, certain laws of conduct, and the law of divorce...You say he abrogated the Torah, but I say he promulgated the Torah, the ten commandments and all the questions which belong to its moral world. But he changed the following: That for a small theft one must cut off the hand. If a person blind another, he must be blinded, or if he breaks another's teeth, his teeth must be broken. Is it possible nowadays to establish the archaic laws of an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth? Christ changed only that part of the Mosaic religion which did not accord with the spirit of his time. He had no desire to abolish the Torah." (*Abdu'l-Baha, Khitabat, pp. 737-747; "Abdu'l-Baha on Divine Philosophy," Chapter V*)

*Shoghi Effendi wrote regarding the secondary teachings of the religion of God in a number of his letters, including those excerpted here:*

The fundamental principle enunciated by Baha'u'llah, followers of His Faith firmly believe, is that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions on the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they

differ only in the NONESSENTIAL ASPECTS of their doctrines, and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society..." (*Shoghi Effendi, in a letter to the United Nations Special Commission on Palestine, entitled "The Faith of Baha'u'llah," 14 July 1947; reprinted in "The Promised Day is Come," Foreword, p. v, 1961; reprinted also in GTT:2*)

The Faith standing identified with the name of Baha'u'llah disclaims any intention to belittle any of the Prophets gone before Him, to whittle down any of their teachings, to obscure, however slightly, the radiance of their Revelations, to oust them from the hearts of their followers, to abrogate the fundamentals of their doctrines, to discard any of their revealed Books, or to suppress the legitimate aspirations of their adherents. Repudiating the claim of any religion to be the final revelation of God to man, disclaiming finality for His own Revelation, Baha'u'llah inculcates the basic principle of the relativity of religious truth, the continuity of Divine Revelation, the progressiveness of religious experience. His aim is to widen the basis of all revealed religions and to unravel the mysteries of their scriptures. He insists on the unqualified recognition of the unity of their purpose, restates the eternal verities they enshrine, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the NON-ESSENTIAL and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions, and on this as a basis proclaims the possibility, and even prophesies the inevitability, of their unification, and the consummation of their highest hopes. (*Shoghi Effendi, letter dated 28 March, 1941, entitled, "The Promised Day is Come," p. 112; reprinted in GTT:118*)

***Note (2018): The compilation was completed by Peter Terry in 1999,***