

THE TWO PARTS OF THE LAW 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.

Sources for this teaching, of the twofold Religion of God, have not yet been located in the Writings of Baha'u'llah. In the record of 'Abdu'l-Baha's utterances, the earliest source for this fundamental Baha'i teaching is found in a talk 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. Spiritual teachings pertain to morality and character which are the breezes of the Holy Spirit, the life of the soul. The spiritual teachings will never be abolished in any cycle, as they are the eternal law. One of the commandments is the love of God, and is the virtue that crowns the heads of the believers...

"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, that is to say, it refers to the spiritual virtues and divine qualities; this does not

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change nor alter: it is the Holy of Holies which is the essence of the Law of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muhammad, the Bab, and Baha'u'llah, and which lasts and is established in all the prophetic cycles...

"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:55,56-57)

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 first aspect of the revealed religion of God is that which concerns the ethical development and spiritual progress of mankind, the awakening of potential human susceptibilities and the descent of divine bestowals. These ordinances are changeless, essential, eternal. 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." (PUP:97-98)

"Inasmuch as the essential reality of the religions is one and their seeming variance and plurality is adherence to forms and imitations which have arisen, it is evident that these causes of difference and divergence must be abandoned in order that the underlying reality may unite mankind in its enlightenment and upbuilding. All who hold fast to the one reality will be in agreement and unity. Then shall the religions summon people to the oneness of the world of humanity and to universal justice; then will they proclaim equality of rights and exhort men to virtue and to faith in the loving mercy of God. The underlying foundation of the religions is one; there is no intrinsic difference between them. Therefore, if the essential and fundamental ordinances of the religions be observed, peace and unity will dawn, and all the differences of sects and denominations will disappear." (PUP:99)

"Each of the divine religions embodies two kinds of ordinances. The first is those which concern spiritual susceptibilities, the development of moral principles and the quickening of the conscience of man. These are essential or fundamental, one and the same in all religions, changeless and eternal--reality not subject to transformation. Abraham heralded this reality, Moses promulgated it, and Jesus Christ established it in the world of mankind. All the divine Prophets and Messengers were the instruments and channels of this same eternal, essential truth.

"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...

"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. But the people of the world have forsaken the divine teachings and followed forms and imitations of the truth. Inasmuch as these human interpretations and superstitions differ, dissensions and bigotry have arisen, and strife and warfare have prevailed. By investigating the truth or foundation of reality underlying their own and other beliefs, all would be united and agreed, for this reality is one; it is not multiple and not divisible." (*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 first is essential. It concerns morality and development of the virtues of the human world. This aspect is common to all. It is fundamental; it is one; there is no difference, no variation in it. As regards the inculcation of morality and the development of human virtues, there is no difference whatsoever between the teachings of Zoroaster, Jesus and Baha'u'llah. In this they agree; they are one. 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...Therefore, the nonessentials which deal with details of community are changed according to the exigency of the time and conditions. But the essential foundations of the teachings of Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus and Baha'u'llah is identical, is one; there is no difference whatsoever...Man must leave imitation and seek reality. The contemporaneous religious beliefs differ because of their allegiance to dogma. It is necessary, therefore, to abandon imitations and seek their fundamental reality." (*PUP:168,169*)

"Each one of the divine religions has established two kinds of ordinances: the essential and the accidental. The essential ordinances rest upon the firm, unchanging, eternal foundations of the Word itself. They concern spiritualities, seek to stabilize morals, awaken intuitive susceptibilities, reveal the knowledge of God and inculcate the love of all mankind. 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 superseded according to the exigencies of time, place and condition...the fundamental realities of the knowledge of God and the holy Manifestations, the purification of morals, the awakening of spiritual susceptibilities--eternal principles in which there is no change or transformation. Briefly, the foundation of the divine religions in 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*)

"But when we speak of religion, we mean the essential foundation or reality of religion, not the dogmas and blind imitations which have gradually encrusted it and which are the cause of the decline and effacement of a nation...allegiance to the essential foundation of the divine religions is ever the cause of development and progress, whereas the abandonment and beclouding of that essential reality through blind imitations and adherence to dogmatic beliefs are the causes of a nation's debasement and degradation." (*Khatirat:610-621/PUP:363*)

"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. One concerns the world of morality and the ethical training of human nature. It is directed to the advancement of the world of humanity in general; it reveals and inculcates the knowledge of God and makes possible the discovery of the verities of life. This is ideal and spiritual teaching, the essential quality of divine religion, and not subject to change or transformation. It is the one foundation of all the religions of God. Therefore, the religions are essentially one and the same.

"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...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, 365-366*)

"Whence this conflict and strife? The real underlying cause is lack of religious unity and association, for in each of the great religions we find superstition, blind imitation of creeds, and theological formulas adhered to instead of the divine fundamentals, causing difference and divergence among mankind instead of agreement and fellowship. Consequently, strife, hatred and warfare have arisen, based upon this divergence and separation. If we investigate the foundations of the divine religions, we find them to be one, absolutely changeless and never subject to transformation. For example, each of the divine religions contains two kinds of laws or ordinances. One division concerns the world of morality and ethical institutions. These are the essential ordinances. They instill and awaken the knowledge and love of God, love for humanity, the virtues of the world of mankind, the attributes of the divine Kingdom, rebirth and resurrection

from the kingdom of nature. These constitute one kind of divine law which is common to all and never subject to change. From the dawn of the Adamic cycle to the present day this fundamental law of God has continued changeless. This is the foundation of divine religion.

"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...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. Therefore, the intrinsic foundations of the divine religions are one." (PUP:393-394)

"In reality, the foundations of the divine religions are one and the same. The differences which have arisen between us are due to blind imitations of dogmatic beliefs and adherence to ancestral forms of worship. Abraham was the founder of reality. Moses, Christ, Muhammad were the manifestations of reality. Baha'u'llah was the Glory of reality. This is not simply an assertion; it will be proved.

"Let me ask your closest attention in considering this subject. The divine religions embody two kinds of ordinances. First, there are those which constitute essential, or spiritual, teachings of the Word of God. These are faith in God, the acquirement of the virtues which characterize perfect manhood, praiseworthy moralities, the acquisition of the bestowals and bounties emanating from the divine effulgences--in brief, the ordinances which concern the realm of morals and ethics. This is the fundamental aspect of the religion of God, and this is of the highest importance because knowledge of God is the fundamental requirement of man...This is the essential foundation of all the divine religions, the reality itself, common to all. Abraham promulgated this; Moses proclaimed it. Christ and all the Prophets upheld this standard and aspect of divine religion.

"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...

"It has been shown conclusively, that the foundation of the religion of God remains permanent and unchanging. It is that fixed foundation which ensures the progress and stability of the body politic and the illumination of humanity. It has ever been the cause of love and justice amongst men. It works for the true fellowship and unification of all mankind, for it never changes and is not subject to supersedure. 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, 404,404-405*)

"We must bestow commendation upon all people, thus removing the discord and hatred which have caused alienation amongst men. Otherwise, the conditions of the past will continue, praising ourselves and condemning others; religious wars will have no end, and religious prejudice, the prime cause of this havoc and tribulation, will increase. This must be abandoned, and the way to do it is to investigate the reality which underlies all the religions. This underlying reality is the love of humanity. For God is one and humanity is one, and the only creed of the Prophets is love and unity." (*PUP:410*)

"Therefore, we must investigate the reality of divine religion, discover its reality, reestablish it and spread its message throughout the world so that it may become the source of illumination and enlightenment to mankind, the spiritually dead become alive, the spiritually blind receive sight and those who are inattentive to God become awakened.

"The teachings and ordinances of the divine religions are of two kinds. The first are spiritual and essential in nature--such as faith in God, faith in Christ, faith in Moses, faith in Abraham, faith in Muhammad, the love of God and the oneness of the world of humanity. These divine principles shall be spread throughout the world. Strife and enmity shall disappear, ignorance, hatred and hostility cease and all the human race be bound together. 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...

"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...Investigation of the one fundamental reality and allegiance to the essential unchanging principles of the Word of God can alone establish unity and love in human hearts." (*PUP:444-445,445-446*)

"Each divine revelation is divided into two parts. The first part is essential, and belongs to the world of morality. It is the exposition of significances and realities. It is the expression of the love of God, the knowledge of God. This is one in all the religions, unchangeable and immutable. 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." (*Abdu'l-Baha, Khitabat, pp. 737-747; "Abdu'l-Baha on Divine Philosophy," chapter V*)

Shoghi Effendi wrote regarding these two parts of the religion of God in a number of his letters, including those excerpted here:

The Revelation proclaimed by Baha'u'llah, His followers believe, is divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men. The mission of the Founder of their Faith, they conceive it to be, to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though differing in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, "abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith." (*Shoghi Effendi, in a letter to the High Commissioner for Palestine, entitled "The World Religion of Baha'u'llah: A Summary of Its Aims, Teachings and History," June 1933*)

"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...

"His purpose, far from belittling the station of the Prophets gone before Him or of whittling down their teachings, is to restate the basic truths which these teachings enshrine in a manner that would conform to the needs, and be in consonance with the capacity, and be applicable to the problems, the ills, and perplexities, of the age in which we live." (*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:2,3)

“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*)

“Nor does the Baha'I Revelation, claiming as it does to be the culmination of a prophetic cycle and the fulfillment of the promise of all ages, attempt, under any circumstances, to invalidate those first and everlasting principles that animate and underlie the religions that have preceded it. The God-given authority, vested in each one of them, it admits and establishes as its firmest and ultimate basis. It regards them in no other light except as different stages in the eternal history and constant evolution of one religion, Divine and indivisible, of which it itself forms but an integral part. It neither seeks to obscure their Divine origin, nor to dwarf the admitted magnitude of their colossal achievements. It can countenance no attempt that seeks to distort their features or to stultify the truths which they instil. Its teachings do not deviate a hair-breadth from the verities they enshrine, nor does the weight of its message detract one jot or one tittle from the influence they exert or the loyalty they inspire. Far from aiming at the overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems, its avowed, its unalterable purpose is to widen their basis, to restate their fundamentals, to reconcile their aims, to reinvigorate their life, to demonstrate their oneness, to restore the pristine purity of their teachings, to coordinate their functions, and to assist in the realization of their highest aspirations...the fundamental principle which constitutes the bedrock of Baha'I belief, the principle that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is orderly, continuous, and progressive, and not spasmodic or final." (*Shoghi Effendi, letter addressed to the*

Western believers, 8 February 1934, entitled, "The Dispensation of Baha'u'llah," reprinted in "The World Order of Baha'u'llah," pp. 114,115; reprinted in GTT:129,131)

COMMENTARY

There are many significances to this duality of the Law of God. First of all, there are aspects of the Law which are immutable and which pertain to its eternal spirit; and, on the other hand, there are aspects of the Law which change according to the exigencies of the age in which they are revealed. This dichotomy is very clearly expressed in all of the above-cited quotations. Secondly, the essential teachings are fundamental, while the secondary aspects of the law are subsidiary--in this sense, the most important teachings are those which are eternal and which span all Dispensations, all Revelations. Hence, it is the essential teachings which compel our attention, which we are enjoined to focus upon rather than the nonessential teachings. This is also clear from the citations found above. Thirdly, if religionists emphasize the material rather than the spiritual teachings they will always be at odds with each other, and they will continue to make claims to exclusive and to superior religious truth, which claims, of themselves, are conducive to dissension, to contention and spiritual blindness, and sometimes, even in these times, to violence and warfare. Fourthly, the nonessential teachings are only applicable to the age to which they were revealed, and hence they cannot possibly serve their purpose in a later age--they are abrogated and adherence to these ordinances becomes an obstacle rather than an aid to attainment of Divine approval. Fifthly, when the followers of all religions investigate the foundations of religion, they will find that the essential teachings are held in common by all, and this will unite them. Sixthly, another significance of this duality is that it affirms the greater value of the spirit of the Law of God over its letter, insisting that meaning is not limited to literal interpretation, even when a literal interpretation is entirely appropriate and necessary. Attachment to outward forms of religion may veil the soul from the spiritual realities which defy form, which transcend all limitations. According to this principle, the spirit is not in conflict with the letter of the Law, but rather, the letter is a guide to the spirit, a pathway to the Divine, and the Spirit is also a guide to the inner meaning of the letter. The letter of the Law is never an end in itself. When a soul adheres too closely to the letter of the Law, clinging to literal or traditional interpretations, or to etymological or other socially-constructed perspectives, it may lose contact with the spirit of the Law, and it is this spirit which is its essence, and which is responsible for its penetration and potency, its capacity to transform human life from the animal kingdom to the Kingdom of angels and prophets.

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