

Challenges of the Construction of a New Morality

by Luiz Gushikan

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The theme I have been asked to address this morning is morals and ethics. I shall confess to you that I had many difficulties in preparing myself for this speech. I would ask myself: how should I address Bahá'ís on a subject in which THEY are the experts -- so much so that it's towards their source that I strive to draw closer? Such being the case, shouldn't I rather be in the audience than at the podium? But as I said before, Bahá'u'lláh's legacy does not belong exclusively to the Bahá'ís, it is indeed a treasure of the entire humankind, and I can draw inspiration from His analysis and doctrine as a bedrock for my presentation.

By the way, concerning the relationship between Bahá'u'lláh and the Bahá'í Faith, recall Mr. Hooper Dunbar's words, in a very rich conversation we recently had in Haifa. The honorable member of the Universal House of Justice told me that the Bahá'í Faith was simply an instrument of Bahá'u'lláh to establish justice, and should the Faith fail to achieve this objective, Bahá'u'lláh would certainly promote it through other means.

Justice -- this is the word round which everything else revolves.

A synthetic world that embodies the great drama of the contemporary world -- a world in convulsion, lost in a multiplicity of false and wayward paths, a world of disharmony, violence, of outrageous wealth and degrading misery, a world illumined by science, but at the same time shadowed by darkness of spirit.

This is the picture that brings into focus the moral issue as one of the central problems at the dusk of this century.

We can certainly discern moral decadence in all countries as a prominent feature in the current stage of human civilization. For my country, this crisis can be perceived in the smallest things. In schools, parents' concerns include not only school dropout, access to education or the quality of education, but also the drug dealer stalking students. In the corporate world, employees live in constant fear of an unemployment that often transforms decent citizens into society's pariahs. On the streets, the threat of being robbed forces one to watch out his or her surroundings. When it comes to families, specially low income families, the breakdown of their unity is caused by violent fathers who pour out abandoned children and wives on the streets. In public agencies, generalized corruption destroys hopes and creates dangerous leadership vacuums. Not to mention the pitiful situation of misery in which millions of human beings excluded from markets and culture live.

In many parts of the world, this panorama of moral, political and social decadence is further aggravated by racial and engender prejudice and above all, by the belligerence of nationalistic and religious fanaticism, which bless violence, incite mass movements and trespass the limits of tolerance.

Despite this tide of events, an important phenomenon can be detected in the collective human psyche. Whereas people marvel at the so called economic globalization, there is a certain insensitivity towards ongoing human tragedies, an inability to discern the complex causal links involved, and even a skepticism concerning human nature itself. There is a clear lack of course, of strategic assurance towards the future.

All that remains is the enjoyment of the moment. To many minds, the tide of events bursting in the world arena is not the expression of a deep crisis, but rather a trivial phenomenon.

This feeling of accommodation in the face of the present chaos -- a kind of social disease -- is the result of the special dynamics that characterize current events: their unpredictability, velocity and abundance.

These characteristics make us see world events as being ephemeral. This impression of fugacity induces us to view such events with a strange lightness and to absorb them as mere daily facts, no more than a repetition of facts that have always been present in history.

Thus, the horrors in Biafra, Rwanda, or Bosnia end up being assimilated as trivial, that is, as transitory and normal incidents, lightly perplexing, perhaps, but soon to be relegated to oblivion.

If that is the case, then the current world crisis presents an element that goes beyond the phenomena that engender the crisis, because it is located in the social psychology of the crisis. And this social psychology manifests itself in the trivialization of tragedy, and therefore in the dwarfing of our sense of outrage. This illustrates how difficult it is to find solutions to our present problems, because there is no greater tragedy than the trivialization of tragedy itself.

In the field of economics, the terminology in use shows very well the limited and tendentious interpretation given to phenomena where human beings are reduced to mere statistics. (GDP, strong currency reserves, monetary budget, income per capita, mortality rate, stock market indices, etc.). This is the realm of the deified market, where everything is cranked into monetary values. There is no room for virtues in the "homo economieus". This important field of human knowledge must needs be remodeled with new elements reaching beyond traditional paradigms.

A perspective of life that monetizes human relationships can only result in social fragmentation in a battlefield crowded with individuals, corporations, nations and blocks of nations and in an absolute inability to promote social justice.

I refrain from presenting here the data reflecting the reality of social misery swamping the globe. So vast is their amount that we are forced to search for other words that may both synthesize them and expose the full extent of their tragedy.

In a world of exacerbated competition, the values of freedom transgress the limits of moderation and prudence. Quite often, we indulge in an individualism that exalts greed and selfishness, and makes the terrain of social relationships arid and devoid of cooperation and friendship. The exacerbation of contemporary individualism seems to be one of the main causes for the deep suspiciousness permeating human relationships.

Not so long ago, in the former Soviet Union, the *raison d'etat* suffocated the individual dimension of human existence in the name of a supposedly fairer type of social organization. Indeed, human spontaneity and creativity had surrendered to fear: Today, the hegemony of capitalism has reversed the tide. It exalts a false view of freedom, stretches individualism to an extreme and abandons social concerns to market forces.

We can even say that these two recent historical experiences represent two extremes in the quest for an adequate role for the individual in society. One exalted the uniformization of individuals, the other, their differences. The former led to the annihilation of the individual's internal forces, whereas the latter in taking individual autonomy to an excess and as a result to the violation of its own limits. The absence of a

proper mediation between the individual and society is conspicuous in both systems -- and it is no coincidence that social deterioration and the loss of the truly unique potentialities of human beings can be witnessed in both of them.

It is undeniable that the world today is headed not to civilization but to barbarism. Everything indicates that we are fastly stepping towards a critical point of moral, social and political decay.

What shall we do in the face of such titanic problems?

The answer to this question cannot be simplistic. In the moral area, evidently it is not a matter of correcting deviations by promulgating a set of moral virtues, an effort that would prove totally ineffective. In the political arena, it is not about finding out an enlightened leader, endowed with imperial powers.

Striving to reach a precise diagnosis of the world's situation is a key strategic issue. If nothing else, a correct diagnosis will deliver us from perplexity and paralysis as we face the thunderous events that will seize the world scene until human affairs have a clearer direction.

I believe that the accuracy of a diagnosis of the present world situation is also dependent on a correct assessment of what is collapsing in human institutions.

For centuries humankind lived with the notion that its problems were to be solved in the scope of its national states. However, with the progress of science and technology, nations wound up finding themselves dependent on decisions lying outside their own domain. More than attesting to the fragility of national states in an independent world, this fact reveals the extreme necessity of searching for new institutional forms fitting this new reality -- a reality in which the flag of world unity, more than a mere appeal for fraternity, is a vital necessity for putting an end to chaos, establishing new paradigms and responsibilities.

The quest for this new unity plateau represents a new historical trend, superior to anything ever built in the past. It carries with it the most noble social, political and institutional aims, because it places the entire humankind under the same political and institutional roof and demands that all members of the human race, regardless of their origin, enjoy security and peace and have access, in a just measure, to the wealth produced in the world.

Every effort aimed at building world institutions contributes, thus, to the acceleration of the delivery process that is afflicting the end of this century. From the standpoint of practical action, one must identify, amidst the disorder, those elements expressing historical trends, refine them with ethical content, and then adopt them as strategic axes.

Regarding this issue, I'd like to offer some remarks on an activity that I have been developing with the precious collaboration of my Bahá'í friends in Brazil.

The friends are aware that Bahá'u'lláh, in one of His tablets, mentioned the role of the Americas in the world's destiny. These words have encouraged me to devise a political project for Latin America.

A couple of years ago it was established the site of the Latin American Parliament, in my country, an incipient institution which has the potential to perform a very important role in the future.

I intend to convince the board of directors of this institution to convene a Latin-American meeting of NGOs and government officials. This meeting would address two issues: the first concerns the implementation of practical measures addressing the major problems afflicting our continent. The second regards the possibility of holding a world conference, so that we could discuss in depth the problems facing humankind. I believe that Latin America, because of the symbolism associated with it, would be the most appropriate site for such a conference since most of the major world problems are to be found in the Northern Hemisphere.

These are just some ideas, but I would like to share with you my gratitude to the Members of the NSA of Brazil for interacting with me on such ideas. I am sure that this is a challenge, and as such, it calls for persistent firmness. I am deeply convinced that, in a direct and just proportion to my personal efforts, the mysterious forces of Bahá'u'lláh will be marching with me.

A lot has been said about the globalization of the economy. It is the time now for globalizing political institutions as well, and searching for the values and instruments which can give birth to a new citizenship, a world citizenship.

My dear friends,

I would like to apologize for dwelling too much on the world crisis and other related issues, when my topic should be confined to morals and ethics. Nevertheless, I think that the issue of morals can be approached in various ways. We could, for instance, discuss how parents should raise their children, or what a school curriculum emphasizing character formation in children should look like.

But I wish instead to draw your attention to the following fact: In a globalized world, the feelings of affection towards different peoples, different religions, different races is a fundamental prerequisite for a new mores and ethic that will cement political, social, and religious relations. Without this broader affection men will remain the prisoners of past and will continue to engage in lacking relationships.

When a society is educated so as to show love and respect only to limited sections of the community, whatever falls outside this little social universe can easily become the object of hostile feelings and prejudice. That is the case, for example, with religious and nationalist feelings. I can be loving with the members of my religion or nation, and at the same time be hateful and disrespectful to those who are not part of them. The tragedy in Bosnia illustrates this fact in both dimensions.

This feeling of a broadened affection or the universalization of love in the present scene implies, in reality, recognizing that the dramas and tragedies of other peoples are our own tragedies.

And this is not a challenge at the level of one's awareness or reason alone. It is about something deeper, the roots of which must sprout in people's very hearts. Achieving this calls for an educational endeavor in an infinitely higher scale than that of traditional education. Conquering this challenge will depend on a concerted effort by formal structures, such as schools, government agencies, families, religions, etc., and informal structures such as the media. It will depend especially on the conduct of leaders who by their example disseminate trust and promote the assimilation of these new values.

World citizenship holds, in my estimation, the basis for new mores and a new ethic.

I have said that achieving it will depend on vigorous educational action. In this regard, religion deserves a keener examination. For in the past, the progress of civilization has always found in the great religions the foundation for a moral ordering of the peoples. There has never been a more vitalizing force than the

Founders of the great religions. However, in the contemporary world, religious institutions have exhausted their energies, have fallen captive to rituals and outworn traditions, and have succumbed to fundamentalist wings fermenting within them. Religious fanaticism, with its violence engendering power, is today the ultimate evidence of the deep inversion of values in which the world is immersed.

The central issue, therefore, is to know whether humanity will have a substitute for the role historically performed by religion.

Beginning in the 18th century, the Western world spawned a great intellectual movement that attempted to build the foundations of morals solely on reason, with total contempt to revealed religion. Voltaire the most severe critic of religion, Isaac Newton, Kant, Hegel, Karl Marx -- these are some of the names who considered it indispensable to disdain spiritual revelations in order to lay down the foundation modern knowledge. They considered human progress to be impossible unless and until dogmas, rituals, religious social precepts and the influence of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were definitely eradicated from society.

This harsh criticism was not without justification, since the religious experience carried in the conscience of that period was rooted in a vast historical period in which the temporal power of the church reigned absolute and was even able to impose its dogma through terror. The inquisition provides the record of the atrocities ever committed in the history of religious movements. And all of this in the name of God.

Thus, it was only natural for the philosophers of that time to shatter those bonds that hindered the advancement of scientific knowledge. One could say that a process of moral secularization was started then, is that their criticism pretended to be an absolute truth general and timeless. From this viewpoint all religions suffer from the congenital defect of irrationalism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, and unsolvable contradiction with science. This view has been prevalent throughout the centuries and has been strongly influenced an important stratum of society: philosophers and scientists. These are not necessarily disbelievers in God, they are disbelievers in religions as being the sole mediators between the being and its deity. That is they do not understand the existence of Prophets or Manifestations of God, and consequently do not apprehend the meaning of the reality of spiritual laws or the principle of progressivity in religious truth.

This is perhaps the tragedy of human condition at the dusk of this century. On one side, disbelief, on the other side, fanatical extremisms and in the middle a great spiritual void. In parallel, science and technology have reached their pinnacle, but their uncontrolled use begins to frighten man himself. Man has become his own hostage. To put in a few words the vital need in this troubled world, I would say the human being needs to become a homo spiritual, a man with a new moral foundation.

I believe that the Bahá'ís do have a proposal that can address this need. Spread it all over. The world is receptive.

Thank you very much.