

Moral Relativism and the Baha'i Faith

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Brendan Cook

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Note: For more on the application of "relativism" to the Bahá'í Faith, see Moojan Momen's *Relativism: A Basis For Bahá'í Metaphysics*. Passing mentions of the topic are found in Ian Kluge's *Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings* (p. 184) and Momen's critique of this article in *Relativism: A Theological and Cognitive Basis for Bahá'í Ideas about God and the Spiritual World*. Finally, I touch on the issue from the perspective of contemporary philosophy in my paper *Communicative Interaction: Relating Habermasian Universalism to Bahá'í Consultation*.

Momen would seem to disagree with Cook's essay below, in observing that "Bahá'u'lláh inculcates a moral code that by today's standards is even considered traditional or old-fashioned and is the very antithesis of moral relativism" (Momen, p. 370). [-J.W., 2014]

A wise man once wrote that the measure of a philosophy can be taken from its detractors. Great ideas have always had great enemies. And moral relativism has, of late, attracted some very prominent opponents. Not long before he was elected to what must surely be the largest organized church in the world, the current pope Benedict XVI warned the Catholic faithful about this in no uncertain terms. “We are moving,” he said “towards a dictatorship of relativism . . . that recognizes nothing definite and leaves only one's own ego and one's own desires as the final measure.” Very shortly after that, no less a person than the president of the United States praised the previous pope for resisting “the tides of moral relativism” and warned the nation’s schools not to “surrender to moral confusion and relativism.” As far as ideas go, moral relativism seems very good at earning condemnation from high places. This kind of attention from great secular and religious leaders puts it in fairly exclusive company.

But what is moral relativism? And why are popes and presidents alike so eager to condemn it? And why is it especially important for Baha'is to understand what is at stake? To start with, it is easy to begin on the wrong foot. Many of the people who think moral relativism a bad thing, and even a few who think it

is a good thing will try to say that it is the same as amorality: the belief that there is no standard of right and wrong, and that actions have no ethical value. While this is one definition, it is not the only one, and it is not the one I am interested in discussing. For there is also another definition of moral relativism, one far more appealing, which I believe a good number of people share with me, even if they would not use quite the same words. Moral relativism, as I understand it, is not the belief that right and wrong do not exist, but that they depend upon circumstances. It means recognizing that what is good in one specific time and place is not necessarily good in another, that the right choice for one individual is not always the right choice for everyone.

As a philosophical perspective, moral relativism is different from sheer amorality in that it makes room, not only for morality, but even for the idea of a single, divinely ordained truth. It does not mean giving up belief in a God who represents a perfect and unchanging standard of goodness. Someone can believe in the same sort of God which the pope and the president say they do and still be a moral relativist. Moral relativism does not claim that God or God's law can change, only that as human beings, our relationship to that fixed and unmoving truth is always shifting. It means looking at moral truth the same way we have become used to looking at the sun since the time of Galileo and Copernicus. I know that the sun does not really move around the earth, but all the same, it rises and sets, swinging further North in the summer and South in the winter. This is because, while the sun does not actually move, I move in relation to it. In the same way, right and wrong change from situation to situation not because God changes, but because we do. This is what is meant by moral relativism. It means that morality is relative to the human condition. It arises out of the relationship between the unchanging nature of God and the constantly changing needs of human beings.

To give another example, one drawn not from science but poetry, there is a place at the end of the Divine Comedy where Dante describes what it is like to behold God. When Dante looks, he says that he sees a glorious whirl of colors and shapes: the vision of God is shifting constantly before his eyes. But does this mean God is actually changing? No, Dante explains, God is perfect and unchanging from the beginning until the end of time. It is not God who changes, but his perception of God. Human eyes and human minds cannot take in the fullness of the divine perfection all at once, they cannot receive more than a little at a time. Like an ant looking at an elephant, Dante sees one thing, then another and another: new aspects of God are always being revealed to him. He is looking at one big thing but only seeing one little piece at a time.

This attitude is especially relevant to Baha'is because it seems, to me at least, to have a great deal in common with how Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l Baha encourage us to understand the unfolding of progressive revelation. Both assure us that the fundamental truth which underlies all the world's religions is the same. However unlike some of the teachings of Buddhism, Christianity, or Sikhism may seem, they are all actually one, Baha'u'llah

and Abdu'l Baha would tell us. They explain the apparently great divergences in all of these faiths through the concept of progressive revelation. This characteristic Baha'i teaching works very much like the account Dante gives of his vision of God. Just as Dante cannot behold God all at once, but sees first one thing, then another; so Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l Baha tell us that God's truth is gradually revealed through his different manifestations. Each messenger of God gives us another piece of the divine truth, but everything is part of a greater whole. It seems to be changing because we never see it all at once. The message appears different in different times, they tell us, because human needs are different as human communities change and grow. This is the essence of progressive revelation, and it is also the essence of moral relativism. What is right in one time and place, the founders of the Baha'i faith make clear, is not necessarily right in another. Abdu'l Baha defends the law of Moses not because it is right eternally, but because it was right for the people who received it at that particular time. Islam too had its time and place. But none of these manifestations are right for all times and all places, which is why God's revelation must always be renewed.

Then of course there are those people who, against what Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l Baha would argue, try to insist that a single revelation is universally valid. They put it forward as the unique, perfect, and irreplaceable expression of divine truth. Some Muslims have viewed the Koran this way, many Jews have encouraged this approach to the Torah, and fundamentalist Christians believe it about the books of the Old and New Testaments in combination. Whatever the revelation is, the attitude is the same. The principles of the faith are considered binding for all time, appropriate for every person in every situation. If this were true, there would be no need for progressive revelation: one divine dispensation would be enough. One book could contain all the answers, and — as a few Jewish, Christian and Muslim believers still seem to think today — could describe and foretell everything that has happened or that ever will; either openly or encoded in prophecy. The appeal of this position is obvious. People who believe this can base their lives on the letter of the teaching without ever needing to consider anything else. The difficult job the rest of us face, the job of trying to judge whether or not to apply a given principle to a situation, the task of thinking has been taken care of for them. They can solve the most challenging life choices like someone taking a test with the key right in front of them: they just have to look up the answers and fill them in. What people like this forget is the essential lesson of progressive revelation — and moral relativism. Even if the truth stays put, human beings and their needs go on moving. And so just as the sun keeps dropping beneath the horizon, the truth is always running away from us, always on the move: and if we stand still too long, it will leave us behind. This is something that has happened again and again through recorded history. People become attached to one revelation and will not accept the next. Because they refuse to move, the truth gets away from them. As the law of Moses gives way that of Jesus; or Mohammed is replaced by the Bab; the people who hang on hardest to the truth they know are the very

ones who end up losing it. Situations change, and they stick with what was right for the generation that came before them. And all the while, His truth keeps marching on.

Up until this point, I think most Baha'is would be in agreement. This seems to be a fairly common understanding of progressive revelation: that while previous manifestations were appropriate for the conditions they spoke to, it is not necessary or even wise to follow all of their commandments indiscriminately here and now. They are not useless or irrelevant, but we have to examine them carefully to decide what still applies to our situation and what does not. Now, what fewer Baha'is would agree to is the claim that this same sort of caution is also required, to a lesser extent, in following the teachings of Baha'u'llah himself. Many Baha'is seem to feel that because Baha'u'llah is the most recent manifestation of God, the one whose teachings are most relevant to our current needs, they can be followed to the letter, without any discrimination whatsoever. This is something I have heard many times among believers. On any issue, big or small, from deciding the age to hold children responsible for crimes to the rules for contracting a marriage, Baha'u'llah's word is considered decisive. In less than two hundred years, the sacred writings have become what the Torah has been for more than two thousand, an infallible guide to the needs of every person and every community.

Why so many believers feel this way is easy to understand. Life would certainly be simple if we could apply what Baha'u'llah had taught in an unvarying and inflexible way. The problem is that life is never so simple: if it was we would not need progressive revelation in the first place. If we could follow what Baha'u'llah taught without the slightest change after more than one hundred years, why not after two hundred years? Five hundred? One thousand? One book really could be given for all times and all people. We would never have to think about anything. Now, someone could easily object here that saying a revelation eventually moves out of step with the needs of the time is not the same as saying this happens right away. The Baha'i faith was given for our age, so the argument runs, and so for our age it ought to be binding. And essentially, I would agree. I happen, by profession, to be a historian, so this is exactly the sort of thing I have considered a great deal. And I have often thought that in all the most fundamental ways, the situation of humanity in Baha'u'llah's day was much the same as it is now. I believe that in the vast majority of cases, what Baha'u'llah enjoined is as fresh and relevant as if it were revealed yesterday. But does this mean that everything is the same now as in the first years of the faith? Would anyone say that nothing has changed since the nineteenth century?

And this brings me to the message that I wanted to share with my fellow believers. Simply because our revelation is recent, it does not mean that we can follow it blindly. We still cannot simply cut and paste standard answers to standard questions. This is often sufficient in Ruhi class, but no class can ever come up to the complexity of life. We still have to make difficult

choices. We still have to think. This is why independent investigation of the truth is one of the central principles of the faith. Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l Baha understood that in all times, and above all in an age like this, when the individual conscience has achieved a new dignity and importance, people must be able to act with discretion. We need the flexibility to make an adequate response to the complexity of the modern world. This is why the faith has no priesthood. There is no need in this age, as there was previously, for a professional caste of interpreters charged with standing guard over the sacred scriptures. This has become a responsibility that falls to every believer. Independent investigation of the truth gives us the means to apply Baha'u'llah's teachings creatively. It means that we have to the obligation to recognize when the conditions of society change and modify our response.

And it is in this capacity, in keeping with my responsibility as a believer to apply the principles of Baha'u'llah to our current situation that I want to make a suggestion. With all respect for the other members of the faith who may feel differently, I would like to indicate a few places where, at this early point in our development, we are allowing the truth to get away from us. Like the sun that is always moving westward through the sky, God's truth has not been still since Baha'u'llah's lifetime. In several crucial areas, I believe we need to catch up. If we hang on too hard to the truth that was revealed, we will end up clutching at nothing.

One example of how I believe conditions have changed significantly since Baha'u'llah's day concerns sexual morality. In the nineteenth century, homosexuality was not simply condemned, homosexuality in the sense we know it today was not understood at all. It was not even an issue. In this situation, Baha'u'llah could no more be expected to write in favor of same-sex marriage than Mohammed could have been expected to endorse women's suffrage in seventh-century Arabia. It would be simply inconceivable. And yet what responsible Muslim claims that because the Koran does not say women should have the right to vote, they should be shut out from democratic elections? It is not so much that Mohammed is against women voting as that universal suffrage, for either gender, is something that never occurs to him. Discerning Muslims understand that it is not the letter of the teachings that applies here, but the principle. The Koran never says that women should have all the rights men do, but it does say that women should be valued and cherished, that their souls are of full importance to God. In considering this question, they look past the precise wording to the spirit that dwells within the words, looking not at what Mohammed said specifically about women, but at the general dignity he accorded them in his revelation.

In the same way, I think Baha'is must not stop with the strict and uncompromising definition Baha'u'llah presents of marriage — two people of the opposite sex — and instead we must see this issue in terms of the spirit of the faith. Baha'u'llah certainly never endorses gay marriage, but he also insists that religion must keep up with science and remain in harmony

with new discoveries. And it is here that the matter becomes more complicated. This is because there is less and less question what position science takes on this issue. As more evidence emerges, it is becoming clear that sexual orientation is something natural, the product of a combination of genetic and environmental factors, and not a sin or vice as was universally believed one hundred years ago. This is a classic example, I think, of how we must decide between the strict letter of the Baha'i teachings and their life-giving spirit. On the one hand, Baha'u'llah is very clear about marriage being for a man and a woman only. On the other hand, he is equally emphatic that religion be reconciled to science. This is a case where there is no simple answer, where no Ruhi response will do. It is necessary here to think. It is necessary to make a choice.

And who should make this choice? Two hundred years ago it would have fallen to the priests, and individual believers would still have had someone else to rule for them. That was the right way in the past, but it is not the right way today. This revelation calls for independent investigation of the truth, and this means all of us must decide independently. If we are moral absolutists like the current president and pope, if we have one correct answer for all times and all places then this choice will be easy. But if we take the moral relativist view, which I believe is a more appropriate Baha'i view; there is not a simple solution. We cannot accept anything Baha'u'llah prescribes blindly, but must test it to be sure that it really applies to our particular situation. This goes for what the faith teaches on same-sex marriage, on capital punishment, on reproductive rights, and even on the prohibition of political involvement. This does not mean the literal teachings on any of these issues are wrong, but it does mean that they are not automatically right, either. Not only may they be right in one time and not in another, they may be right for one person but be utterly inappropriate for someone else. God's truth never changes, but the human condition is relative, and even the best rules need to be applied creatively and flexibly in relation to the problems of each human being.

And it goes without saying that the same applies to what I have said here. I do not presume to deal in the absolute truth, which is too big for any human being to see all at once. I am only offering suggestions which may or may not prove useful to other people in their individual situations. I am not even sure about the specific recommendations I have made. Perhaps this is not the best time for the faith to endorse same-sex marriage; perhaps the world as a whole is still not ready. I wrote this essay not so much to suggest that the literal teaching is wrong on a specific issue, as to challenge the idea that it cannot be wrong on any issue. More than single out any particular commandment, I wanted to ask whether we need to swallow everything whole. It is not this teaching of the faith or that which I object to, it is an attitude which is often implied towards the teachings generally. We see this attitude whenever someone tells us 'Baha'u'llah says' as if it were an unanswerable response to any question, whenever someone uses the phrase 'a fundamental principle of the faith' as if here all difference, all discussion, all thought must stop. It

is the attitude that treats life like a Ruhi lesson where every question has a ready-made answer waiting for it, an answer that is the same for every person, short or tall, male or female, black or white. It is a one-size-fits-all approach to the difficult choices life puts to us. With an attitude like this, there is no room for personal difference, for an individual solution to fit you and me in our individual needs; there is no allowance that truth, so often, is relative to each of us. Another great principle of the faith is unity in diversity, and it is to remind the believers, myself included, of the value of diversity that I have written this. We need to recognize that just as God has a unique and incomparable destiny for each age and for every individual, so the answers to the difficult moral questions we face have not one but many answers, depending on time and place and person. As human beings we often want the choices we make to be simple, but God, who thankfully is much wiser, always ensures that they never are.

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