

The Pharisaic Phenomenon and the Dynamics of Denial

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Pharisaic Phenomenon and the Dynamics of Denial, bahai-library.com.

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The Pharisaic Phenomenon and the Dynamics of Denial

Susan Maneck

1999

When I was growing up in a Christian home, my understanding of the Gospel story went something like this: God had expressed Himself through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, a simple man, whose sympathies lay with the common folk. He was opposed by the stuffy, legalistic Pharisees who sought to destroy Him for not abiding by their minutiae of rules. The battle between Jesus and the Pharisees was the battle between spirit and law, between common folk and the elite, between simple truth and hypocrisy. These were the demarcation lines that separated good from evil in my young mind, and having been raised in one of the more liberal wings of the church, it was easy for me to imagine that the demarcation line ran between conservative and liberal as well. I remember my pastor at the time proudly asserting that while Judaism had some seven hundred and some odd laws, Jesus had reduced them to essentials such as, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." When I discovered the Bahá'í Faith in my early teens and declared at the age of fifteen I developed a new appreciation for religious law, which was quite different from the attitudes with which I had been raised, but it wasn't until I started college that I came to realize what the Pharisees actually stood for and that, far from representing the exact opposite of Christianity, the Pharisees' teachings were closest to Jesus, as opposed to the Sadducees who were the most literal-minded and conservative faction among the Jews. The Pharisaic school, with its synthesis of the best of Jewish thought with perhaps a sprinkling of Zoroastrian concepts, represented the finest fruit of the two most profound religious traditions of Jesus' age. How is it then that Jesus is said to have addressed them in such harsh words as these?

"But woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye devour widow's houses, and make for a pretense long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation. Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. .

. . Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat and swallow a camel. Woe unto you, scribes an Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess. . . . Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity. . . . Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? Wherefore, behold, I send unto you prophets and wise men, and scribes: and some of them ye shall kill and crucify: some of them ye shall scourge in your synagogues, and persecute them from city to city. That upon you may come all the righteous blood shed upon the earth . . . " (Matt. 23:13-35)

It has usually the case that those who oppose a new message from God will invariably be the ones who, to outward seeming ought to be closest to it. Hence the Pharisaic school rejects Jesus, the Jews of Medina (the only people of with much knowledge of prophethood) oppose Muhammad, the Shi'ite Muslims prove the most intolerant of Bahá'ís.

What I would like to do here is examine very carefully what the dynamics of that denial in hopes that we can understand what is it that causes those, who one might expect to be the first to embrace a new message from God, are instead its most vigorous opponents. I will attempt to draw out a number of interrelated aspects to this; the tendency human beings have to want to control, systematize and contain revelation in manageable categories usually by taking a part for the whole in religion, the role played by the imagination in rejection, the tendency to confuse rigidity with firmness, the specific type of learning which tends to be encouraged within a religious context, the role played by pride and arrogance, the particular temptation of power and leadership, and finally the manner in which religion so often becomes a mask for the genuinely evil and hypocritical.

There is a story about a child who was busily occupied drawing a picture. Her mother asked her what she was doing "I'm drawing God," she answered. The mother said, "But honey, no one knows what God looks like." Unperturbed the child answered, "I will when I'm finished." This child obviously had a big imagination. Many places in the Writings, do not seem to look too kindly on the imagination. Imaginings tend to be paired with adjectives like "vain," "corrupt," and "idle." As an adolescent who daydreamed a lot these references used to bother me a great deal. This, of course, was not what Bahá'u'lláh was talking about rather He was speaking about those who allow their own wishes in regards to what ought to be stand in the way of recognizing what God reveals of His Will. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that people, "deprive themselves of the inner reality and by clinging to vain imaginings they are kept back from the Dayspring of heavenly signs. God grant you may be graciously aided under all conditions to shatter the idols of superstition and to tear the away the veils of the imaginations of men." It is when our images stand between us and reality when we have a problem.

Let's take the example of our little girl. Right now she is guilty of nothing worse than naivete. She, like all of us, is continually in the process of creating an image of God. The problem, if it arise, comes in after she thinks she has completed her picture and now "knows" what God looks like. And even here this may not be such a big problem unless she becomes so attached to the image she has thus created that when God presents Himself, either in the form of the Manifestation or in some more subtle form, she fails to recognize Him.

The imagination is a large part of what makes us human. It is what makes rational thought and creativity possible. But within the Abrahamic religions the imagination is also considered it is also the root of all evil! As Genesis 8:21 puts it "For the imagination of a man is evil from his youth." Martin Buber wrote an interesting essay on the topic of the problematic nature of imagination in his book *Good and Evil*. He says: "Imagery, 'the depictions of the heart' (Psalm 73:7), is play with possibility, play as self-temptation, from whichever and again violence springs. It too, like the deed of the first humans, does not proceed from a decision; but the place of the real perceived fruit has been taken by a possible, devised, fabricated one which, however, can be made, could be made — is made — into the real one.

This imagery of the possible, and in this its nature, is called evil. Good is not devised; the former is evil because it distracts from divine reality. . . . imagination is not entirely evil, it is evil and good, for in the midst of it and from out of it decision can arouse the heart's willing direction toward Him, master the vortex of possibility and realize the human figure purposed in the creation. . ." (p.91) In other words the imagination, insofar as it can imagine that which is other than God's will, is the root of all evil. Yet from it alone arises the free will which is able to submit to God, to answer affirmatively the question "Am I not your Lord?" and become all we are intended to be. If imagination remained as the "play of possibility" its harm would likely be limited. If guided by revelation the imagination can be a most powerful source for good. Unfortunately what often happens is our imaginations, if they do not outright reject revelation quite often attempt to control it.

There is a story that was once told to me by an Orthodox Jew. It seems that a group of Jews had gathered together and was arguing about a passage in the Talmud. As tempers and voices rose there was suddenly heard the voice of God from heaven saying, "Thus and such is the truth." The Jews present protested, "You have already given us the Torah. It is for us to decide now what it means, You have no right to interfere." Now the Jew who told me this tale said it with pride and it could not quite understand my discomfort with it, but it seems to me it touches the very heart of the problem. The Qur'an says, "The Jews say that the Hand of God is tied up. Tied up are their own hands for what they have said. But the Hands of God are outstretched. (5:67)

Now there is nothing at all unusually or especially perverse about the attitude of some Jews in this regard, beyond the perversity which seems to exist in all men. One of the greatest Muslim philosophers of the twentieth century, Muhammad Iqbal, sometimes regarded as the father of Pakistan, insisted on the Muslim

doctrine of the Finality of Prophethood on the basis that man; having now reached the level of maturity, had no need for anymore divine interference! Having contained revelation, having mastered it and placed it under our control, having squeezed it neatly into our categories, the last thing we want is to having it burst forth unpredictably once again. Thus the pattern repeats itself again and again. "And Joseph came to you aforetime with clear tokens, but ye ceased not to doubt of the message with which He came to you, until, when He died, ye said, 'God will be no means raise up a Messenger after Him.'" (Qur'an 40:36).

Besides the need to control, there is no small amount of arrogance involved here. 'We can handle it now, God, we don't need you anymore.'and that is where the pride comes in. Humility, after all, is acknowledging, in the deepest way, our need for God. But there is another part of it. Pride sets in when the need to be right takes precedence over determining the truth. Bahá'u'lláh notes that leaders of religion did not simply lack knowledge and understanding, they were unwilling to seek it out if it would upset their presuppositions (KI p. 17).

Control and pride are typically to be found together. As often as not, the kind of education encouraged among the Pharisees, as later tended to predominate within Christendom, as well as among the 'ulama of Islam was aimed, not at the investigation and discovery of truth, but rather the mastery of a certain predetermined body of knowledge. Among the Shi'ites, for instance, on becoming a mujtahid one was given a diploma (ijazah) which stipulated precisely what books one had read. Innovation, far from being something encouraged, was a byword for heresy. For this reason the religious leaders in every age insisted that the Promised One Who comes "must needs promulgate and fulfil" the laws of the previous dispensation. (KI p. 18.) But the Promised One who comes is never the One expected and Revelation overturns all of our preconceived categories. Hence Bahá'u'lláh insists: "Were He to decree as lawful the thing which from time immemorial had been forbidden, and forbid that which had, at all times, been regarded as lawful, to none is given the right to question His authority. Whoso will hesitate, though it be for less than a moment should be regarded as a transgressor. Whoso hath not recognized this sublime and fundamental verity, and hath failed to attain this most exalted station, the winds of doubt will agitate him, and the sayings of the infidels will distract his soul. . . . Such is the teaching which God bestoweth on you, a teaching that will deliver you from all manner of doubt and perplexity, and enable you to attain unto salvation in both this world and the next." (KA 166-67) And likewise: "Whenever My laws appear like the sun in the heaven of Mine utterance, they must be faithfully obeyed by all, though My decree be such as to cause the heaven of every religion to be cleft asunder." (KA 7)

It is to the leaders of religion that Bahá'u'lláh explicitly conveys these words: "Weigh not the Book of God with such standards and sciences as are current amongst you, for the Book itself is the unerring balance established among men. In this most perfect balance whatsoever the peoples and kindreds of

the earth possess must be weighed, while the measure of its weight should be tested according to its own standard, did ye but know it." (KA 100) The leaders who oppose a new revelation may not, in and of themselves, be any more perverse than other people. But the degree to which a person is going to be invested in a particular position is likely to be directly proportioned to the extent of their personal stake. One whose livelihood, whose position, whose total life commitments are challenged by a new revelation is going to find it the most difficult to accept. But scholars and religious leaders certainly have no monopoly on pride. We all, after all, have to choose fidelity to truth over the need to be right, over self-justification. But pride in religious leaders and scholars, by the nature of the subject matter they deal with, can have catastrophic consequences. For instance, if I'm an architect and am too prideful to admit a design of mine might be flawed the worst consequence will likely be that my building will collapse and some people may be killed. On the other hand, arrogance in a religious leader can result in a million souls being led astray. In most cases those religious leaders who reject the Manifestations of God are quite likely to regard themselves as something analogous to what we Bahá'ís refer to as "firm in the Covenant." Indeed, they would argue that it is their commitment to the explicit text of Revelation that compels them to reject and oppose this new message that would completely overturn it. In general, however, they are clinging very tightly to their understanding of specific parts of scripture, a canon within the canon as it were, instead of seeing each passage within context of the whole. This, of course, is the manner in which sects are formed. As the Qur'an describes these people as "those who have split their religion, and have become sects, where every party rejoices in what is their own." (Qur'an 30: 31).

The Bab, in the *Kitab-i Panj Sha'n*, alludes to this problem as well describing it as a failing of the heart not to consider all things within their own context, and that no position should be rejected out of hand (pp. 400-01). The Bab points to the numerous factions within both Christianity and Islam and insists that had they remained united by cleaving to the entirety of the scriptures they would have been able to recognize the new revelation. But since each one regarded themselves as the sole possessors of truth, they were quick to reject any new perspective. Thus, in clinging tenaciously to a single point, antagonisms arise among scholars which will eventually be directed against the next Manifestation and cause His followers to be persecuted.

The Bab goes as far as to say that it is better to remain ignorant than to create this kind of disunity. But note that it is not the learning itself which causes such problems, rather it is the inability of the scholars to work together in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance, resolve their differences and to humbly consider one another's views. (My thanks to Dr. Ahang Rabbani for bringing this text to my attention and for his commentary on it.)

It is all too easy to mistake rigidity for firmness, to imagine one is being firm by clinging to a particular aspect of revelation while rendering it false by failing to place it within the context of the whole. This is largely what

happened to Charles Mason Remey. Remey always saw himself as a champion of the Covenant. During World War I when the believers in the West were cut off from access to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Remey zealously headed the Committee of Investigation which declared the founders of the Chicago Reading Room to be Covenant-breakers. After the death of the Guardian, because both the Will and Testament and Shoghi Effendi's writings had described the Universal House of Justice functioning alongside a living Guardian, it was inconceivable to his understanding that the line of Guardians should be brought to an end. Indeed if we think about it for a minute we realize that most of those who violated the Covenant have done so because they opposed many of the innovations which the authorized leadership was putting in place.

A very objective history of the Faith was written in the form of a doctoral dissertation by a non-Bahá'í entitled "An Historical Analysis of Critical Transformations in the Evolution of the Bahá'í World Faith." The author Vernon Johnson noted perceptively that major transformations were undergone by the Bahá'í community each time leadership changed hands. Those who subsequently broke the Covenant were typically those who wished to hold the Faith back in the form they conceived it. As Johnson asserts "against each effort to innovate were segments of the faith's adherents who objected to the new developments and who saw themselves as loyal to the previous leader or system of the religion." (p. 393). The Bab insisted that the Bab's revelation would endure for 1,511 or 2,001 years. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's opponents accused Him of overstepping His authority and claiming a station equivalent to a Manifestation of God. The opponents of Shoghi Effendi accused him of having killed the liberal and universal spirit of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and constructing the Administrative Order into the narrow, sectarian mode of other organized religions.

When strong winds blow, the trees without any roots will be the first to blow over. But if the storm proves strong enough, even the mighty oak will be uprooted. It is the willow, which besides having strong roots, is flexible and can bend which best survive the most violent tempest. The greatest dangers in religion have come from those who were surest they understood God's Covenant most completely. This was true of those clerics who, in every age, have rejected God's Messengers and it has been true of some of the most infamous Covenant Breakers as well.

Now some may object here and say "Isn't this glossing over the real character of these people." Would Muhammad Ali have been so quick to oppose 'Abdu'l-Bahá were he not next in the line of the succession if 'Abdu'l-Bahá was removed? Was not Ruth White and Ahmad Sohrab's opposition to Shoghi Effendi rooted in their desire to have a religion in which they could "do their own thing"? Was Mason Remey's spurious claim to Guardianship not grounded in his own desire for leadership? Almost certainly, yes. The fact of the matter is we tend to take the most rigid stance on those issues which coincide with our own self-interests. For this reason the Bab, emphasizes in the Kitab-i Panj Sha'n, that faith must always be grounded in one's willingness to attain the

good-pleasure of God rather than because it coincides with one's own desires. Yet in many cases our need to be right so overcomes our dedication to truth that we can no longer distinguish between our own desires and the Will of God. We become blind to just how self-serving our own ideas can be.

Usually Bahá'ís insist that Covenant Breaking involves the most serious kind of sin because it is committed against the Cause of God by people who know full well what they are doing. For instance Abib Taherzadeh distinguishes between an enemy of the Faith and a Covenant-breaker in these terms "The former attack the Cause of God mainly through ignorance, and perhaps they will be forgiven by God. The latter, however, know where the Source of Truth is, but are unable to turn to it; instead, for their own selfish reasons, they knowingly rise up against it." (The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 253-54). Yet 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes in the Will and Testament that the Covenant-breakers "know not what they do. They discern not good from evil, neither do they distinguish right from wrong, nor justice from injustice." (W&T p. 28.)

So which is it? Do they know or don't they know? I submit that both things are true. On some level they know what they are doing is wrong. On the other hand, it is impossible that they could continue to do so, unless they somehow manage to persuade themselves that what they are doing is not wrong. The more radical the self-deception involved the more radical the evil produced. As the Qur'an says: "And be ye not like those who forget God, and whom He hath therefore caused to forget their own selves. Such men are the evil doers." (Qur'an 59:19). Radical evil is measured, not so much by the extent of one's sin, but by one's refusal to acknowledge it. One loses all capacity to take responsibility for one's actions.

Such people are what the psychiatrist Scott Peck terms the "People of the Lie." They usually appear quite ordinary. But as Scott Peck notes: "Evil is not committed by people who feel uncertain about their own righteousness, who question their own motives, who worry about betraying themselves. The evil in this world is committed by the . . . self righteous who think they are without sin because they are unwilling to suffer the discomfort of significant self-examination." (People of the Lie, p. 72). Such persons according to Scott Peck commonly use scapegoating in order to deflect blame from themselves, sacrificing "others to preserve their self-image of perfection." Peck goes on to say: "Scapegoating works through a mechanism psychiatrists call projection. Since the evil, deep down, feel themselves to be faultless, it is inevitable that when they are in conflict with the world they will invariably perceive the conflict as the world's fault. Since they must deny their own badness, they must perceive others as bad." (pp. 73-74) We can see many of these elements operating in the case of Mason Remey. His rigid understanding of the Covenant persuades him that there has to be a second Guardian. This is inextricably intertwined with his own desire to be appointed as such. Remey finally concludes that he has been appointed and that the Hands of the Cause are perverse for not recognizing him. Yet he knows full well that no such appointment took place. He finally has no choice but to blame the one who

"failed" to appoint him, Shoghi Effendi! Eventually he describes the Guardian as a "sick and disorganized soul" and unabashedly speaks of "violations of the Faith that were made unwittingly by Shoghi Effendi." (Johnson: 370) This from someone who accused the Hands of having discarded the Will and Testament! If the world confronts us with our shortcomings, how much more does Revelation!

For this reason the Day of the appearance of Revelation is regarded as the Day of Judgement in the Bahá'í Faith. As the Qur'an says "It is to those who believe a guide and a medicine; but as to those who believe not, there is a thickness in their ears, and to them it is a blindness." (41:44). Peck, at one point, defines evil "as the exercise of political power &151; that is, the imposition of one's will upon others by overt or covert coercion--in order to avoid . . . spiritual growth.(p. 74) It is the opposite then of submission and it is no accident that such persons will often seek out positions of leadership in order to achieve this end. Peck goes on to say, "Spiritual growth requires the acknowledgment of one's need to grow. If we cannot make that acknowledgment, we have no option except to attempt to eradicate the evidence of our imperfection." Erich From called this kind of pathological state "malignant narcissism." As Peck describes it, "Malignant narcissism is characterized by an unsubmitted will. All adults who are mentally healthy submit themselves one way or another to something higher than themselves, be it God or truth or love or some ideal. . . . Not so the evil, however. In the conflict between their guilt and their will, it is the guilt which must go and the will that must win." (p.78) In short, the radically evil must conceal their sinfulness from themselves. Yet if they had no cognizance of it whatsoever, such mental gymnastics would be unnecessary. As Scott Peck notes: "We lie only when we are attempting to cover up something we know to be illicit. Some rudimentary form of conscience must precede the act of lying. There is no need to hide unless we first feel that something needs to be hidden." (pp. 75-76) Each time God's Revelation confronts such people with the truth, they become all the more fixed and hardened in their rejection. Thus the Bible says "And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh." (Exodus 9:12) It is for this reason that such persons are described as hating the light and the Gospels describes them as having committed the unforgivable sin against the Holy Spirit (Matt.12: 31-32).

'Abdu'l-Bahá comments: "This detestation of the light has no remedy, and cannot be forgiven; that is to say, it is impossible for him to come near unto God . . . if a soul has an aversion for the light of the lamp, he is, as it were, blind, and cannot comprehend the light; and the blindness is the cause of everlasting banishment from God." While Covenant-breakers may be the best expression of this kind of evil to us as Bahá'ís, it is by no means limited to this. Every religion has its fair share of these kinds of people, in fact religions in general have more than their fair share, and religious leaders more so than any. Since radical evil is, by its very nature a cover-up, religious hypocrisy and false piety provide one of the best means to achieve this end. But perhaps, in another sense all persons who engage in this kind of behavior are covenant-breakers, for our commitment to the Covenant consists in

our affirmative response to that perennial questions, "Am I not your Lord?" And ultimately as Peck points out, "There are only two states of being: submission to God and goodness or the refusal to submit to anything beyond one's own will."

METADATA

Views8124 views since posted 2011-09-09; last edit 2022-03-20 02:05 UTC;

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