

Preface to an Arabic edition in preparation: *The Imperishable Dominion* — 30 years later

As indicated by the title¹ of the first edition, which appeared in the German language in 1978, the intention of this book is to present a portrait of the Bahá'í Faith in the context of the spiritual condition of our time. The subject matter of the book is the message of Bahá'u'lláh, seen against the background of the reality of the world in which we live, of its structures, ideas, theories and ideals. The English-language edition *The Imperishable Dominion*, which appeared in 1983 and on which the Portuguese translation is based, corresponds broadly to the second German-language edition, which appeared in 1981. Since nearly thirty years have gone by in the meantime — a relatively long period in our fast-moving times — the book is in several respects no longer entirely up to date:

The corpus of knowledge about the Bahá'í Religion has grown considerably since that time. The increase since then in the number of Bahá'u'lláh's works published in Western languages is impressive. A reliable English-language edition of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* has been freely available since 1992. The *Súratu'l-Mulúk*, the *Súratu'l-Haykal* and other tablets from Baha'u'lláh to the world's rulers, of which only excerpts had hitherto been translated, are now available in unabridged form in Western languages.² A further important mystical work from Bahá'u'lláh, *Javáhiru'l-Asrár*, has appeared in English.³ Associations for Bahá'í Studies have been established in a number of countries with the objective of investigating the historical, philosophical, social, legal and political aspects of the Bahá'í Faith. There exist nowadays a fair number of Bahá'í academic journals⁴ which contribute to the advancement of our understanding of the Bahá'í Faith. Basic theological research has made considerable progress — thanks not least to the interreligious dialogue which has been actively fostered since the nineties of the last century. A respectable number of dissertations on Bahá'í topics has been produced during the past decade.

Even more perspicuous is the tremendous change which our world has experienced during these past decades. The collapse of society, which I describe

1 *Der Bahá'í in der modernen Welt. Strukturen eines neuen Glaubens*, Hofheim.

2 *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*. Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre 2002.

3 *Gems of Divine Mysteries* (Javáhiru'l-Asrár), Haifa/Israel, Bahá'í World Centre 2002.

4 *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies*; *Bahá'í Studies Review*; *Zeitschrift für Bahá'í Studien* etc.

in chapter 2, has accelerated at an alarming rate. Immorality, crime and alcohol and drug addiction have achieved gigantic proportions in all parts of the world. Pornography, pederasty, forced prostitution and dealing in drugs are being pursued in many places on an industrial scale. Corruption is severely corroding the institutions of society, also in the so-called “developed” countries. The banking world and transnational corporations have been severely damaged and even toppled by fraudulent managers. Corrupt functionaries and politicians shamelessly stuff their own pockets at the expense of the general public and the poor, negating in the process all measures to improve the lot of the people.

At the time the book first appeared, personal computers were hardly known beyond a small circle of specialists. The networking of the globe via Internet has revolutionised world-wide communication. The political world, formerly divided into two major blocks of power, has become multipolar in the wake of the implosion of the Soviet Union. The Marxist ideology has since then been continuously on the retreat: the relevance of Communism has become marginal everywhere except in North Korea, Cuba and China, where it is still state doctrine (in the last-mentioned case in name only).

The expectation that the end of colonial rule in Africa and in other parts of the world would bring freedom, prosperity and security to the liberated peoples has proved illusory. A totally unjust global economy, aggravated by mismanagement and corruption, has resulted in the impoverishment of entire populations. Justice is “in the clutches of tyranny”⁵ in many parts of the world, where the perversion of governance has pursued to two directions: at the one extreme, totalitarian states, whose citizens are the defenceless victims of repressive and arbitrary state power, and at the other extreme, anarchy in regions in which state control has broken down and where War Lords and Mafia-like gangs pursue their rule of terror. In Cambodia ideological fanaticism and in the heart of Africa tribal hatred both resulted in the mass extermination of millions. Nationalism, newly enflamed and alarmingly wide-spread, led in the Balkan wars in the 1990’s to population displacement (“ethnic cleansing”) and to horrific acts of genocide. The disease of AIDS has spread to every corner of the globe; in Africa the epidemic, which has swept its victims away in great numbers, has destabilised whole social systems.

5 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 14:11; 11:7; see also *ibid.* 7:6; 8:52; 9:3; 14:14.

The authority of the United Nations has been weakened by unilateral military actions. George Bush's (senior) vision of a New World Order has pitifully failed.⁶ Religious fundamentalism, whose popularity is currently on the steady increase, finds expression in many parts of the world in the form of fanaticism, religiously motivated hate, violence and war. The world of Islam — from Mindanao in the Philippines to Morocco — is being afflicted by a whole series of bloody attacks. The terror organisation Al-Qa'ida is intent on dragging the entire world into the abyss. The attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, together with those in London and Madrid, are expressions of a hitherto inconceivable dimension of terror. New powers whose inner stability is wanting and whose awareness of global responsibility is open to question have come into the possession of atomic weapons or are in the process of acquiring them. The horror scenario of an atomic war in the Near East is being discussed in all seriousness. And as if that were not enough: the looming threat of a climate catastrophe demonstrates that mankind has entered into the most critical phase of its entire history so far. Bahá'u'lláh already described the situation for his own contemporaries gloomily enough:

The winds of despair are, alas, blowing from every direction, and the strife that divideth and afflicteth the human race is daily increasing. The signs of impending convulsions and chaos can now be discerned, inasmuch as the prevailing order appeareth to be lamentably defective.⁷

We have arrived today in the deepest shadow of the events which he predicted:

The world is in travail, and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned towards waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight, that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. Its perversity will long continue. And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake. Then, and only then, will the Divine Standard be unfurled, and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody.⁸

In light of these multifarious developments, this book must be considered antiquated. Merely updating the statistics provided and expanding the body of scientific literature drawn upon would not do justice to the developments during the past three decades; that would effectively require re-writing the whole book.

6 One of the few positive developments in the political world was the establishment of the International Criminal Court — in spite of the reluctance of the USA and other countries to endorse it.

7 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 11:27.

8 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 61.

Alas, I am no longer capable of undertaking such a task. I already experienced once how work-intensive and time-consuming such an exercise can be as I actualised the book in preparation for its translation into Chinese in 1988.⁹

The question therefore presents itself whether it is still worth while translating a work such as this into yet another language: a question which is still timely, since a Portuguese edition of the book has been published in 2008 as well.¹⁰ Despite its diminished actuality, however, there are numerous reasons why the book can still fulfil its purpose in its present form.

First of all one must consider that there is nothing comparable on the market of Bahá'í standard literature; in fact, the German-language edition is still being bought and read. To the extent that its object of study was the “modern world”, the book represents, as it were, a “snapshot” at a particular moment of time. As the German editions first appeared, many held the portrait which I had presented of the secular world and of the apocalyptic proportions of the threat facing us to be “exaggerated”. These voices are now all silent. The rapid development since that time has only verified the analyses and conclusions which I had voiced at the time.

The “apocalypse”, and therewith the core of the book, is the demise of the “old order”¹¹ as it was announced by Bahá'u'lláh, a process which is made most visible by the on-going collapse of our system of values¹². Whereas some readers may ascribe this evaluation of the situation to the author's Bahá'í conception, they would do well to consider that he is not alone in his judgement. The fact that nineteenth-century thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky had in their time already announced the rise of nihilism will be described in detail in the following chapters. In the meantime, there are many who perceive that little remains of traditional morality. The philosopher Hans Jonas, for example, describes “the ethical vacuum” which remains after the sacred has been “thoroughly destroyed”¹³. And the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre observes matter-of-factly:

9 Alas, the whole effort was in vain: given the political atmosphere following the massacre in Tian'anmen Square in Beijing, the Chinese cultural publishing house which was to bring the book out was no longer in a position to continue the project.

10 *O Domínio Imperecível A Fé Bahá'í e o Futuro da Humanidade*, Editora Bahá'í do Brazil.

11 Cf. Bahá'u'lláh, *Áhrenlese* 4:2; 143:3.

12 In this regard see also Schaefer, *Bahá'í Ethics in Light of Scripture. An Introduction* (Oxford 2007), vol. 1, pp. 101ff.; *Beyond the Clash of Religions. The Emergence of a new Paradigm* (Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 3rd ed. 2004), pp. 26ff.

13 *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago 1984), pp.

We have — very largely, if not entirely — lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality . . . There seems to be no rational way of securing moral agreement in our culture.¹⁴

He makes it unmistakably clear that all attempts to replace traditional morality with a purely rational, philosophically substantiated moral code are “bound to fail”¹⁵.

There are those who, come what may, refuse to recognise a crisis in the undeniable signs of disintegration of traditional morality.¹⁶ They view this phenomenon, which they euphemistically call “change of values”, as a natural process — after all, every contingent thing is subject to change, as the Greek philosopher Herakleitos (550-480 BCE) expressed: *Panta rhei* (*Everything flows*).¹⁷ But he who observes this process from a perspective anchored in the belief that the realm of personal values is fixed in transcendence, so that it is equally as unalterable as the *conditio humana* itself, perceives that something outrageous, something never before experienced is taking place: the thesis of the relativity of all values — not only socio-political values, but also those of personal ethics — has become the dominating philosophy, has assumed the status of secular dogma. But if it were true that all values are relative, that good and evil don’t really exist at all, if the nihilistic thesis that nothing in the world possesses unconditional validity should prevail, then it would be the case, as Pope Benedict XVI has remarked¹⁸, that ethics is devoid of obligation.

Ratzinger’s predecessor Pope Johannes Paul II dedicated a complete encyclical to the question of the erosion of Christian morality: *Veritatis Splendor*

22ff.

14 *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2nd ed. 1984), pp. 2, 6.

15 *After Virtue*, p. 52.

16 By way of example: the political pressure exerted in the 1970’s to achieve the acceptance of practiced homosexuality as an expression of sexual self-determination and to permit homosexual marriages [see *The Imperishable Dominion*, pp. 64ff.] seemed at the time not much more than the chimera of a few wacky excentrics. By contrast, same-gender marriage is legally recognised in most European countries today. Anti-discrimination legislation makes it a risky venture to voice a critical opinion in this respect, as is demonstrated by the case of a leader of British Muslims. Sir Iqbal Sacranie was placed under investigation by Scotland Yard because he explained in a radio interview that homosexual acts were immoral and socially damaging according to Islamic ethics. For further details see Schaefer, *Bahá’í Ethics in Light of Scripture*, vol. 2 (2009), § 23, section 7 (p. 210).

17 God alone is essentially unchangeable, always the same: see *Súratu’l Haykal* in *Summons* 70, 197; *Javáhiru’l-Asrár* (*Gems of Divine Mysteries*) 87; *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 2; *Gleanings* 94:1; *Prayers and Meditations* 132:1; 163:4.

18 Joseph Ratzinger, *Glaube, Wahrheit, Toleranz. Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 4th ed. 2005), p. 102.

(1993). In it he spoke very candidly about the “wide-spread tendencies towards subjectivism, utilitarianism and relativism”¹⁹. He spoke of a “serious and corruptive dichotomy . . . which separates faith from morality”²⁰, and expressed his distress over “a decline or obscuring of the moral sense”²¹. He recognised in this development “the most dangerous crisis which can affect man: the *confusion between good and evil*”²². He identified the cause of this crisis with the process of “growing secularization”²³ and “dechristianization” of countries, “once rich in faith and Christian life”²⁴, where “many, indeed too many, people think and live as if God did not exist”.²⁵

But Christianity is not caught up alone in this process of decline. All religions have more or less expended their vital spiritual energy, because in the divine plan of salvation their time has come to an end.²⁶ They have either opportunistically conceded to the spirit of the times, or they have adopted fundamentalist positions, thereby running the risk of becoming politically instrumentalised, of becoming the source of sectarian hatred and, in the extreme, of religiously motivated terrorism.²⁷ Writing in a region which is characterised to this very day by dark religious fanaticism, Bahá’u’lláh predicted the worldwide crisis in faith in God and, as a result, the disintegration of all values:

The face of the world hath altered. The way of God and the religion of God have ceased to be of any worth in the eyes of men²⁸ . . . The vitality of men’s belief in God dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?²⁹

As early as 1941 Shoghi Effendi clearly analysed “the signs of moral downfall,

19 Encyclica *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), no. 106.

20 Ibid., no. 88.

21 Ibid., no. 106.

22 Ibid., no. 93.

23 Ibid., no. 88.

24 Ibid., no. 106.

25 Ibid., no. 88.

26 Cf. Hebrew 8:13: “In that he says, A new covenant he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxes old is ready to vanish away.” The same idea has been expressed by Bahá’u’lláh: “As the body of man needeth a garment to clothe it, so the body of mankind must needs be adorned with the mantle of justice and wisdom. Its robe is the Revelation vouchsafed unto it by God. Whenever this robe hath fulfilled its purpose, the Almighty will assuredly renew it. For every age requireth a fresh measure of the light of God” (*Gleanings* 34:7). See also ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 7:7.

27 More on this topic in Schaefer, *Bahá’í Ethics in Light of Scripture*, vol. 1, p. 101.

28 Bahá’u’lláh, quoted in Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 117; see also p. 119.

29 *Gleanings* 99.

consequent to the dethronement of religion . . . invading both the East and the West".³⁰ Bahá'ís believe that Bahá'u'lláh revitalised belief in God and revealed to mankind the brazen tablets of moral order for a new age, just as Moses did to the tribes of Israel on Mount Sinai.³¹ This conviction informs the author's perspective of contemplation and criterion of judgement in his attempt to present the message of Bahá'u'lláh in the context of the spiritual situation of our time. The problematic which is dealt with in this book remains as current and topical as ever. And today, perhaps more than at any time previously, it is manifest that the message of Bahá'u'lláh is the only effective remedy for a mortally ill world.

I have always been fascinated by Arabic, a language of revelation. But although I have managed to appropriate an arsenal of basic theological terminology in Arabic over the years, I have never had the time or opportunity to learn the language systematically. It is a particular source of joy to me to know that my humble attempt to present the Bahá'í Faith in the context of contemporary Western thinking is now appearing in Arabic, and I am deeply indebted to my friend Gamal Hassan, who has taken on the extremely difficult and time-consuming task of translating this text from the English-language edition into Arabic.

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30 *The Promised Day*, p. 119.

31 See Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 5:11; 17:60. On this subject see Steven Lambden, "The Sinaitic Mysteries: Notes on Mose-Sinai Motives in Babi and Bahá'í Scripture", in Moojan Momen (ed.), *Studies in the Babi and Bahá'í Religions*, vol. 5, pp. 65-143.