

ETHIC FOR A GLOBAL SOCIETY

1. We are living in a time of a global upheaval. Everything that seemed to be firm and solid has been seized by the storm of change. As Bahā'u'llāh foretold, the »world's equilibrium« has been »upset«¹ and the »present-day order«, »lamentably defective,«² is being »rolled up.«³ The collapse of the prevailing order, the radical change to a new order of things, to a level of a greater complexity and more coherent organisation, the breakthrough of the present world-society to a world-commonwealth integrating all nations, to a »new World Order,«⁴ entails chaos and catastrophes. Many people feel that their very existence is threatened, many see in these events the »Horsemen of the Apocalypse«.

In this process of change nothing had undoubtedly such a far-reaching, radical effect on society and human thought as the change in moral views, ideas and concepts which took place during the past decades. There are no reliable answers any more to crucial questions such as: What is man? What is the purpose of his existence? What standards should man live by? What is good and what is evil? What is permitted and what prohibited? There is no moral orientation any more, nothing to hold on to. Within a few decades a change has taken place with almost breath-taking speed in the way people think. It can certainly be described as a cultural revolution when one considers its far-reaching consequences. Norms and values which had been established by religion, which had been handed on, kept alive and considered absolutely valid for two thousand years, and were even recognized by the rationalists of the Enlightenment in the 18th century as rational values, were swept away within a few decades. After having lost their transcendental basis they were open to critical questioning, and very soon they were dissolved in the acid bath of a one-dimensional rationalism: That attitude which does not allow anything to have validity unless it can be established by empirical reason. This process of disintegration of the value systems and its consequences which has been described in my book *The Imperishable Dominion*⁵ resulted in a spiritual vacuum, which is becoming more and more evident, and in a lack of moral orientation, which is threatening society from inside.

1 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 181; *Tablets* 11:27; *Gleanings* 143:3.

2 *Tablets* 11:27.

3 *Gleanings* 4:2; 143:3.

4 *Kitāb-i-Aqdas* 181.

5 p. 33 ff.

Mankind's most crucial problems such as the ecological crisis, the population explosion, the unjust order of the present system of world economics and the North-South-Conflict resulting thereof, tyranny and despotism at power in many states, civil wars in more and more countries, and above all the outbursts of irrational violence in every part of the world - these problems of man's survival on this planet can only be solved on a world wide basis or not at all. But at the very same time as the nations are challenged to develop a co-operative global system capable of acting in solidarity, society is rapidly disintegrating and losing its structures. The bonds which hold society together are becoming weaker and weaker, living together with others is becoming more difficult every day, and more and more conflicts arise.

Probably nothing shows the decline of traditional morals and the sickness of our society as clearly as the new dimension of evil with which we are confronted today: The brutalization of our world by the increase in violence. The British writer Gordon Rattray Taylor has described this process already in the seventies in his book *How to Avoid the Future*⁶ and stated: »Just as high temperature warns us that all is not well in the body, so violence is an indication that something is wrong in society.«⁷ This phenomenon confronts us in the rapidly increasing readiness to settle conflicts with violence. Now, violence is as old as humanity. New is its impact within highly technological societies, the constant presentation in the media, and its presence in our daily lives. More than twenty years ago Friedrich Hacker in his bestseller on violence⁸ described its nature, the brutalization of the modern world, and the extent to which violence has become part of our lives:

»The most horrifying dimension of modern brutalization is not that individual and collective violence flares up more frequently... but that it is becoming more and more common and customary. Violence has become an everyday, natural trivial event, a banal trifle.«⁹

A society progressively loses its cohesion and is destined to perish, if there are no ultimate values and no absolute obligations, if there is no civic sense (which was called »*civitas*« by the ancient Romans), that »spontaneous willingness to obey the law, to respect the rights of the others, to forego the temptations of private enrichment at the expense of the public weal.«¹⁰ Society cannot survive if its members have lost the ability to share and sacrifice, if everyone emphasises only to further his own rights and

6 London 1975.

7 *op. cit.*, p. 31.

8 *Aggression*, Reinbek 1973.

9 *op. cit.*, p. 13 ff.

10 Daniel Bell, *The Contradictions of Capitalism*, p. 245.

endeavours only his own interests, if the highest aim in life is Mammon and sensuality, if society is based on hedonism and egotism.

The cultural crisis of the West, announced and analysed by philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Spengler, has developed to a global crisis of human civilisation, which endangers the survival of mankind. What is the cause of this process and whither is it leading us?

2. At some time or other in his *phylogenesis*, in time beyond memory man escaped from the barriers deriving from his instincts. He was no longer exposed to the compulsions of nature, he gained his freedom and now had to gain control over his urges by conscious action. Action - this is a human category: The animal does not act, it reacts.

Man's grandeur and his dignity is his freedom, however, this is also what endangers him. In gaining freedom he lost the automatic security provided by the functionalism of the instincts, which the animal has. From this time on, man has obtained his orientation from values. All human societies have systems of generally accepted values at their disposal, which provide goals, means and orientation for the individual as well as for society. History reveals that mankind's great value systems are rooted in the great historic religions and the civilisations founded by them. Western civilisation is a genuine Christian one, Judaism, the culture of antiquity and later on the influence of Islam had a strong effect on it. The values and standards people followed were an integral part of their faith, from which they also obtained their highest motivation for their moral conduct.

For three hundred years, however, the foundation of these values, the Christian faith has been on the retreat. It is no longer the standard and the centre of life, it is drifting to the outskirts. Atheism has become a political movement. For seventy years, in socialistic countries a militant, missionary atheism was the dominant ingredient of state doctrine. In these countries, religion survived in the underground; several generations grew up without any religious education. However, in the West too, religious traditions are withering. Symptoms of the decay of Christendom are seen in the dramatic exodus from the Church - in Germany every year some hundred thousands of Catholics and Protestants resign from Church membership¹¹ - and the loss of religious consciousness: Today most parents no longer impart a religious consciousness to their children; religious

11 in 1991 and 1993 more than 500 000 left the Church in Germany.

faith is no longer discussed in the families. Church leaders frankly admit that Europe is no longer a Christian continent.¹²

This crisis is especially reflected in the increasing rejection of institutionalized Christianity among the youth, and their turning instead towards radical worldliness and self-centredness. In his study, commissioned by the Protestant Church, Heiner Barz, professor at the University of Heidelberg, comes to the conclusion that the young generation is characterised by the rejection of any doctrine and by suspicion of all traditions received from their parents and any institutions. In the Church they see primarily a »power apparatus« identical with that of the Party, the State or the Tax Office. According to Barz, the Christian image of Jesus and the symbols of Christianity are of little relevance, and the teachings of the religion are frequently unknown, while the concept of »sin« is either unknown or dismissed as »outdated.«¹³

The crisis of Christianity and in its wake the crisis of morals has been on the way for a long time: since the European Enlightenment, that Copernican revolution in thought which began in the 17th century, and by which the Western world has been moulded. This new attitude of mind was based on a belief in the power of reason, on the conviction of the absolute certainty of rational knowledge: »Faith in the old presuppositions and authorities, for so long considered valid beyond question, gave way to a spirit of criticism. Reason claimed to be autonomous and set itself up as the unique court of appeal.«¹⁴ The spirit of modernism, which made a method of doubt, has profoundly changed the world: This new attitude of mind, implying as it does a liberation from prejudice and preconceived ideas and at the same time a commitment to methodological discipline and absolute objectivity, was felt to be the ideal for man in his newly-attained independence and maturity. This new way of thought has laid the foundation of our scientific-technical civilisation. In the field of law we owe to it great victories over barbarism: The principles of equality before the law and of the separation of powers, the triumphant advance of democracy, the abolition of torture and the humanisation of penal law, in short, the modern constitutional state, a state which binds the power of the ruler to the law and protects the citizen from governmental arbitrariness.

However, the spirit of modernism is also responsible for the deep crisis of faith and, in its consequence, for the crisis of morals. Doubt was cast upon the Christian Revelation, religion was declared to be superfluous, even detrimental. Or, as Bertolt Brecht put it in

12 The decline of Christianity is the subject of chapter 1 of *The Imperishable Dominion*.

13 *Postmoderne Religion. Jugend und Religion*, vol. 2, pp. 137, 172, 251, 261.

14 Theodore M. Greene, *The Historical Context and Religious Significance of Kant's »Religion«*, p. IX.

his drama »Galileo Galilei«: »Belief has prevailed for a thousand years, but now doubt has taken its place... Doubt is cast on time-honoured truths, and what always used to be taken for granted is now questioned.« It is one of the central dogmas of the philosophy of the Enlightenment that religion is destined to wither away. Nietzsche's formula »God is dead!« has become the slogan of the century. Secular society - i. e. a society from which religion has been banned - and the mature and autonomous human being - i.e. man emancipated from the traditions of the past and absolutely self-determining - have become the goal and the orientation of the people.

The belief in God has been replaced by the belief in reason and human progress, by the belief in the completion of history by science and technology. The messianic expectations have been replaced by the utopia of a man-made paradise. Man's conviction that he is able to create a better world, the »Messianic Kingdom,« by rational analysis and political actions has superseded the transcendental promises of salvation.¹⁵ Thus, the world has been made rational and technical, and, as a consequence, utilitarian. What remains is a vast emptiness in which man is cut off from his metaphysical origins, and left impoverished with merely the affairs of this world, to care about: discovery, invention, progress, achievement, production and consumption.

Nowadays, at the end of the second millennium, the optimistic belief in the omnipotence of reason and the Enlightenment, in science and progress, has dwindled. Jürgen Habermas, teaching philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, has diagnosed perplexity among intellectuals and politicians, a lack of confidence in Western civilisation. The deficiencies of an imbalanced Enlightenment are becoming more and more evident. The fading Christian faith has left a vacuum which has, as Nietzsche clearly predicted, seized everything which is built on this faith: »For example our entire European morality.«¹⁶ There is no longer an answer to the essential questions of life: What is man? What is the meaning of his existence? How should he live? Nietzsche called this phenomenon of the devaluation of the highest values and the lack of meaning *nihilism*: »The aim is lacking; ›why‹ finds no answer.«¹⁷ Nihilism is the conviction »that nothing has any value, that no standards are binding, that no purpose exists, that there is nothing worth living or dying for, that everything is futile.«¹⁸ Russian writers like Turgenev and Dostoievsky described the spreading spiritual vacuum in their novels. In its consequences clearly recognized by European thinkers of the past century, nihilism

15 On the »secular salvation« cf. *The Imperishable Dominion*, p. 10 ff.

16 Nietzsche, *The Joyful Wisdom*, no. 343.

17 *The Will to Power*, I,2.

18 Brezinka, *Erziehung und Kulturrevolution*, p. 46.

has become the shaping power of our civilisation: »The frustration, the embitterment, the hatred of history, of the illusions of the past and the reality of today are the origin of that nihilism which is inundating us. Nihilism is the other side of the hope for a man-made paradise. We have arrived on the other side of the coin.«¹⁹

The philosophers of the Enlightenment vehemently refused to accept the reproach, that atheism means amorality, and the prognosis, according to which the decline of religion would finally cause the devaluation of the moral values. Pierre Joseph Proudhon²⁰ wrote: »*L'homme est destiné à vivre sans religion ... La loi morale .. est éternelle et absolue... Eh, qui donc aujourd'hui oserai attaquer la morale?*«²¹ The values were regarded as natural, self-evident and generally valid for all times, they were considered to be eternal truths recognized by reason. However, what seemed to be self-evident and absolutely valid has been critically questioned little by little, and finally dissolved. The absoluteness of moral obligations was abandoned and replaced by a pluralism of non-obligatory value concepts, by relativism and subjectivism of all values. A non-obligatory, pluralistic ethics, however, is a »Lichtenberg knife,«²² a knife without a handle and a blade.

The mechanisms of this process are obvious: If rational proof is the only gauge for evaluating an ethical norm, then a norm that commands positive action can only be recognized if it is proved to be of advantage to everyone, and the norm that has a prohibitive function can only be recognized when the social harmfulness of the prohibited act is evident to all. That means, any value you are pleading for is in need of rational justification. However, even if you can supply a norm with, as you feel, cogent reasons, you never can convince another person who has a different view. This is why Bahā'īs face endless discussions when they offer their moral concepts. Although the prohibition of narcotics including alcoholic beverages can be justified on the basis of an abundance of medical and social reasons, most people react with criticism. And if you mention a virtue like chastity, a word which has almost completely fallen out of usage, it gives rise to mockery or biting sarcasm: You are looked at as if you had come from another star.

This »critical attitude of the mind,« which recognizes none but rational values automatically rejects the notion of unconditional duty and the existence of generally

19 Wolfgang Kraus, *Nihilismus heute*, p. 138.

20 1809–1865.

21 *De la création de l'ordre dans l'humanité ou principe d'organisation politique*, p. 38 no. 60 (»Man is destined to live without religion ... Moral law is eternal and absolute... Who then would dare to attack morality today?«).

22 Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1742-1799), a physicist at the University of Göttingen, famous for his aphorisms.

binding norms. Every human being is then the supreme judge of the norms of his life-style and of the social order. That is the meaning of the new ideal of »self-determination« and »maturity,« whereas the recognition of an authority which cannot be questioned, and the observance of its commandments is contemptuously dismissed as »immaturity«:

»The illusion is cherished that everyone by means of his own mental efforts will be able to realize what he should do and will be capable of making a free choice for or against what should be done ... Thus, the individual with his subjective desires, his chance experiences, his restricted knowledge and his limited understanding is granted the right to consider himself the measure of all things.«²³

The consequences:

»The belief in absolute duties is replaced by calculating adaptation to the contingencies of the day. The love for ideals which demand that man overcome his egocentricity cannot emerge in a society in which it is considered »progressive« to doubt everything. As this love dwindles, so does the motivation to exert oneself in ethical areas and the energy to devote oneself unselfishly to greater tasks ... In such a spiritual climate, the growth of egotism is accompanied by the spread of pessimism and the foreboding of destruction. One becomes indifferent to the welfare of others and is only concerned to get the best for oneself as long as this is still possible.«²⁴

The emancipation of morals (*from religion*) which appeared at the beginning of modern times, was followed by the emancipation of man (*from morals*). When value systems are separated from the soil of divine revelation, they shatter. Apart from God, morality has no foundation, no hold, no support. Dostoevsky was referring to this consequence when he had Ivan Karamasoff say: »If God does not exist, then everything is permitted. If there is no God, then nothing matters.«

III.

The ethical deficiencies have been recognized increasingly. For decades silent on this subject, philosophy is now focusing on ethics again - the number of recent publications on ethics is rapidly increasing. However, all the secularistic attempts of moral philosophy to found a rationalistic ethics which is practicable and generally obligatory as well have failed. Its failure, in which the British philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre recognizes the very cause of the crisis of Western civilisation²⁵, is due to the fact that no moral rules can be deduced conclusively from an abstract concept of man, from man's »dignity.« Reason

23 Brezinka, *Erziehung und Kulturrevolution*, p. 16 ff.

24 Brezinka, *op. cit.*

25 *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory*, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 2nd ed. 1984.

is not able to make »thou shalt« statements which are clear and acceptable to unanimous agreement. The question as to man's »dignity« cannot be answered without reference to a clear concept of man. The nature of man, however, is a question beyond rational, empirical and scientific knowledge. The concepts offered by the humanities are focused on man's biological nature. They reduce man to his biological, chemical and anatomical elements and deny his freedom and his dignity, as B.F. Skinner's well-known work »*Beyond Freedom and Dignity*«²⁶ clearly shows, in which he radically denies guilt, responsibility and the existence of objective values. Moreover, moral obligations based on reason alone, even if they could be made evident, cannot be invested with the inner authority, that urges the individual to comply with standards created by himself: »Why should man shy away from barriers which he or his kind have erected?«²⁷

With each day it is becoming increasingly evident that mankind's survival is not an issue of technology and pragmatism, but an issue of new binding values and goals for the individual, of political actions based on a set of generally accepted values appropriate to the conditions of a global society. Bertolt Brecht's slogan »*Erst kommt das Fressen, dann die Moral!*«²⁸ has been disapproved by historical experience: In the states of the former Soviet Union it has painfully become evident that without morals there will be no more »grub.« The relief-actions of Western countries for old people and children in Russian cities nearly failed because of the corruption of those who were charged with the distribution. Many of the goods were stolen or sold on the black market.

What is to be done? How can dying morality be revived? How can people be motivated to submit themselves to norms which demand much of them? How can they be induced to do good and to shun evil? What can cause them not to lie to their fellowmen, not to deceive them, not to steal from them? What can cause people to overcome their greed, envy and hatred, to restrain their basic drives, to resist the temptations of corruption, to sacrifice for others, in short: to be »a good man« in a world in which, as Bertolt Brecht put it, »*Supplies are scarce and human beings base*«²⁹?

Normative ethics has always had its bases in religion. Religion alone is able to create a system of transcendental values and ideals. It translates values into standards of behaviour, passes them on by education to the younger generation and keeps them alive in the consciousness of society. The question whether man possesses an innate sense of justice was put to 'Abdu'l-Bahā. He answered in the negative and stressed man's

26 Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977.

27 Messer/Pribilla, *Katholisches und modernes Denken*, p. 95.

28 *The Three-Penny Opera* (»First comes the grub, then the morals«. The German version is much more full of expression.).

29 *The Threepenny Opera*, 1st Threepenny Finale.

dependence on divine revelation: »If we ponder the lessons of history it will become evident that this very sense of honour and dignity is itself one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God. We also observe in infants the signs of aggression and lawlessness, and that if a child is deprived of a teacher's instructions his undesirable qualities increase from one moment to the next. It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honour is the result of education... Even if we grant for the sake of the argument that instinctive intelligence and the innate moral quality would prevent wrong-doing, it is obvious that individuals so characterized are as rare as the philosopher's stone... Universal benefits derive from the grace of the Divine religions, for they lead their true followers to sincerity of intents, to high purpose, to purity and spotless honour, to surpassing kindness and compassion, to the keeping of their covenants when they have covenanted, to concern for the rights of others, to liberality, to justice in every respect of life, to humanity and philanthropy, to valour and to unflinching efforts in the service of mankind. It is religion, to sum up, which produces all human virtues, and it is these virtues which are the bright candles of civilisation.«³⁰

A reconstruction of morals can only derive from a living faith. Values can only be absolutely valid if they are not in need of a rational justification, if they are not in contradiction to reason, but at the same time are immune to criticism, that means if they are based on God as the lawgiver. Nothing but such a morality can ever hope to overcome the pluralism and relativism of all moral concepts prevailing in the world nowadays, and to motivate people to accept such standards as obligatory and to live according to them.

Because mankind has developed into a global society, this society is in need of a global code of ethics. Hans Küng, the renowned Catholic theologian, has acknowledged that this world only has a chance of survival if it is endowed with a common, universal standard of values, ideals and goals. In his brilliant book »Projekt Weltethos«³¹ he presents the opinion that such a world ethos can only be based on the common values of the great world religions, as only religion can provide man with an apodictic, categorical, absolute norm which is also practical. The recent *World Parliament of Religions* in Chicago³², one hundred years after its first meeting, has approved a »Declaration Toward a Global Ethic.« Seven thousand representatives of the world's religions signed and solemnly presented a statement of a minimal ethic on which all could agree.³³

30 *The Secret of Divine Civilisation*, p. 97 ff.

31 München ²1990; English edition: *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, London: SCM Press, 1991.

32 August/September 1993.

33 cf. Hans Küng/Karl-Josef Kuschel, *A Global Ethic. The Declaration of the Parliament of the World's Religions*, London: SCM Press Ltd. 1993.

In fact, the project of a »global ethic« took already place as early as 120 years ago when Bahā'u'llāh revealed the *Kitāb-i-Aqdas*, the Charta of a divine legislation. The Bahā'ī Faith offers to all mankind a new ethics, a new hierarchy of values for the global society, anchored in the divine revelation, and supplies mankind with a new spiritual impulse for a new ethos. As in the past, this new ethos is brought about by the new Word of God, which, as Bahā'u'llāh says, »alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change«³⁴: for the spiritual rebirth of man.

34 *Gleanings* 99.

35 *The World Order of Bahā'u'llāh*, p. 109/110; cf. *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26.