Kafka's spiritual dimension

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Franz Kafka (1883-1924) once wrote, "For everything outside the phenomenal world, language can only be used allusively."(2)

In his fiction he adhered so closely to this principle that the metaphysical significance of his work is often overlooked. In this essay I aim to draw attention to his exploration of religion and spirituality in three of his best-known short stories: The Judgment, In the Penal Colony and Before the Law.

The Judgment begins with Georg Bendemann, at home with his ageing father, writing to a friend in St Petersburg to announce his engagement to a certain Frieda Brandenfeld. He has reservations about conveying his own happiness to his friend who faces business failure and loneliness as an emigrant bachelor. He turns to his father for friendly advice. Herr Bendemann, however, resents his son's new-found self-sufficiency and reacts angrily, insulting his fiancée and even denying the existence of his friend. He then changes his mind abruptly, not just acknowledging the existence of Georg's friend but claiming to be in league with him against Georg, and to have written to St Petersburg himself. He tells Georg:

He knows everything a hundred times better than you do yourself, he crumples up your letters unread in his left hand while he holds up my own letters to read in his right!

As the story proceeds, Georg is overwhelmed by his father's relentless verbal attacks. When his father eventually condemns him to death by drowning, he feels compelled to carry out the sentence. He runs out of the house and throws himself off a bridge.

One approach to The Judgment is to compare Georg's social dilemma to that faced by Kafka at the time he was writing. He was himself engaged, and sets up a direct correlation with his hero by giving Georg's fiancée the same initials as his own, Felice Bauer. Yet further biographical

investigation
does not lead us to a bachelor friend in St Petersburg. According to his diaries of the time, Kafka was afraid that by settling into matrimony he would neglect his writing. It has been suggested that Georg himself represents material comfort and family life, while his friend personifies the self-denial and isolation Kafka found necessary for his art. The friend's ill-health and the meagre returns of his business reflect Kafka's prospects, at least in his father's eyes, of earning his living as a writer.

It is not enough to say that Georg's friend is the writer in Kafka and Georg is not. Though Georg's friend displayed a talent for vivid story-telling on an earlier visit to the Bendemanns, it is Georg whom we see writing. He desires to maintain his "correspondence" with the lonely emigrant however slow and uncomfortable the process of communication may be. This tendency is implied by the first half of the name Bendemann which suggests the German verb binden, to tie or unite. Georg tries to satisfy the demands of friend, fiancée and father, just as Kafka hoped to reconcile social obligations with his need for artistic expression.

Yet The Judgment has a deeper significance than the author's own life. While Kafka's situation was delicate, it was not a matter of life and death. In the final tirade before passing the death sentence on his son, Herr Bendemann tells Georg:

So now you know what there's been in the world besides
you, until now you've known of nothing but yourself.

Reaching maturity and leaving the domestic sphere prescribed for him is an act of rebellion in his father's eyes. Georg's father places him in a double bind; he expects Georg to take increasing control over his own life, but without encroaching on his own paternal authority. It is a typically Freudian conflict between father and son; its pivotal moment is when Georg is calmly tucking his father in to bed and he springs up in revolt, accusing Georg of trying to bury him. From this point Georg is on the defensive, as he is increasingly dominated by his father both physically and verbally. He tells Georg that his marriage is a disgrace to the memory of his mother and taunts him with a crude impersonation of his fiancée. Georg is told:

You were an innocent child, it's true, but it's even
more true that you've been a diabolical creature!

Traditionally good and evil have been with us since Adam; Kafka compared their co-existence in man to two interlocked hands, "inseparable without cutting through flesh, blood and bone."(3)
Yet Georg's father is able to effect this fission, delivering a swift verdict in contrast to the lengthy equivocations of the human justice system in Kafka's novel The Trial. Thus his pronouncement invites comparison with the "Word of God" according to Hebrews 4:12:

...sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the
division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow.

In coming of age Georg has lived out his own Fall of Adam; his father punishes his perceived rebellion with the compelling wrath of the Old Testament God. Georg on the other hand is distinctly human, indeed a kind of Everyman, as implied by the second half of his surname. Such a confrontation between God and man could of course never happen, as Bahá'u'lláh says, "Divine revelation hath been vouchsafed unto men in direct proportion to their spiritual capacity."(4)

But Georg's father shows him no such consideration. In his quasi-religious search for guidance from a higher authority, Georg is met by a being whose power and knowledge infinitely surpass his own. He is consequently "dismayed and overpowered,"(5) as Bahá'u'lláh describes the effect on individuals of unmediated revelation. He can no longer resist his father's accusations with logic as these rules of human interaction no longer apply. His guilt requires no rational proof.

The Judgment depicts a turning-point in a human life. This is an eminently suitable focus for a short story, creating tension without the need to document the entire sequence of events leading up to the dilemma. Kafka's own life was finely balanced, but given the story's wider significance, his vision of a human being at a turning point may be considered a reference to the special position of mankind in creation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this role and its ensuing complications in Some Answered Questions:

Man...is the end of imperfection and the beginning of
perfection. Not in any other species in the world of existence is there such a difference, contrast, contradiction and opposition as in the species of man.(6)

In concentrating on the relationship between Georg and his father, it is easy to ignore Georg's friend, whose presence in the story seems to have no bearing on the central family relationship. A distant and anonymous figure, he seems to dwell only at the periphery of Georg's consciousness, yet leaps to sudden prominence. We have considered that in the biographical schema he may personify the author's artistic nature. As the source of artistic expression is the soul, he may at the general human level be considered
to represent Georg's spiritual side. Georg enjoys a measure of material prosperity, as did Kafka's generation of Prague Jews at the expense of their Jewish identity. Now Georg belatedly turns his attention to the requirements
of his soul in the person of his friend. Herr Bendemann calls Georg's friend "a son after my own heart," recalling God's creation of man, and specifically the human soul, "in his own image." The substance of his shocking revelation to Georg is that the spiritual self he has neglected for so long, whom he has allowed almost to die away, is in fact "ten thousand times" more

significant than the physical man who is about to be married. His rediscovery of his soul is like the eating of the forbidden Tree. It is a necessary act, for without good and evil he is not human. But in maintaining contact with his spiritual nature he makes himself accountable to God. Kafka's Aphorism #86 neatly summarizes Georg's fate:

No man is satisfied with the Knowledge (of good and evil) alone, but must endeavour to act accordingly. But he is not granted the power to do so, hence he must destroy himself...

In The Penal Colony centres on an explorer who observes the gruesome execution of a soldier in an island penal colony. The officer in charge also initiates him into the judicial system on which the colony operates: "Guilt is always beyond question." The story is often considered a prophetic work, prefiguring the totalitarian regimes that would emerge later in the century, but its genre is not purely sci-fi horror. The officer peppers his expository monologue with distinctly religious language. Thus the guilty soldier has not merely disobeyed an order but "transgressed a commandment" (similar terminology is used in Dostoyevsky's Crime and Punishment). He begins to enthuse about the former commander of the colony and it soon becomes clear that he attributes to him an almost messianic status. His reign was a golden age in which the whole population of the island would assemble to observe each execution and all those involved in the ritual of justice were held in great public respect. Now, as the explorer observes almost immediately, the people have no interest in executions; indeed the landscape against which the story unfolds is oppressively empty. Only the officer remains faithful to the old commander, operating the death-machine strictly according to the instructions contained in his writings, with such reverence that he performs ablutions with sand before handling them. The picture is complete when the explorer learns that the officer, awaiting the resurrection of the commander, has even tried to exhume him.

The local people the explorer meets are well aware of the beliefs associated with the former commander but do not seem to take them very seriously. The officer survives on nostalgia; he and his attendant continue to wear their heavy old uniforms because "they signify our homeland; we don't want to lose our homeland." In the Penal Colony is thus a depiction of what happens when a system of belief loses its relevance for the community it once supported. It draws on Kafka's experiences of Jewish society. His father insisted on his participation in Jewish observances as a child, but Kafka soon gained the impression that these were superficial practices with no grounding in genuine belief.(7)

Increasing assimilation meant the Jewish faith was no longer the binding force of Kafka's generation. Neither "drawn by the already heavily sinking hand of Christianity" nor "grasping at the last fleeting corner of the Jewish prayer-shawl like the Zionists," he identified himself with an era of transition in religious history: "I am an end or a beginning."(8)

Unlike secular Western societies which are based on democracy, the ideal of Jewish society is the Mosaic theocracy. Under the social contract of democracy, crimes against society are defined and punished by representatives of the people who constitute it, but in a theocracy crime is replaced by sin, defined and punished by God.(9) Civil law sets limits to permissible behaviour within a society and requires mere obedience, but divine law constitutes the Covenant of God with humanity and demands whole-hearted allegiance, as Bahá'u'lláh says in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty."(10)

The Law is central to Jewish identity as it is to any religious society, for by following its prescriptions in every aspect of personal life one is bound into the life of the community of its followers. In The Penal Colony this bond has broken down; the great public ceremonies have become the private rituals of an isolated die-hard. What occurs in the colony resembles the decline of a religion. Since the death of the former commander the community has polarized into extremists and the disaffected. His official successor has come into conflict with his most fervent disciple, the officer, who jealously exercises what power he can in his role of executioner.
Like a modern fundamentalist he considers himself the upholder of religion and guardian of the conscience of the people. He operates on the principles of close obedience to received dogma and absolute certainty in the justice of his actions, remains oblivious to public opinion and is ultimately ready to sacrifice his own life to his cause.

The story contains indications of the cause of decline. When the explorer inspects the former commander's writings he finds the original laws impossible to discern from the calligraphic ornamentation, "a maze of criss-cross lines," that surrounds them. As the officer insists that the incisions in the condemned man's back must follow precisely the prescribed pattern, it is these supplementary wounds which cause the fatal bleeding. The implication
is that religion can become harmful, as a result not of its original teachings but of stubborn adherence to every detail of the additional dogma which accretes around it. Corruption creeps into religion until it is indistinguishable
from the truth and is just as vigorously upheld. In a startling metaphor Kafka describes a religious service at which leopards break in to the temple and steal the sacramental wine. The same thing reoccurs until it is considered an indispensable part of the ceremony.(11)

The key is not to prevent evolution within religion but to recognize it as it occurs. Though fascinated by the age of the patriarchs, Kafka was never as keen a Zionist as many of his contemporaries. The target of his criticism here is not Judaism or religion itself but the mindless perpetuation

of its rituals and the self-righteousness of those who refuse to accept change. What Kafka found most damaging in human relationships was the urge to accuse, blame and judge others. He wrote that the source of original sin "consists in the accusation a man makes, and which he will not abandon, that he has been wronged."(12) Though all faiths exhort its restraint, this tendency is often strongest in those who consider themselves religious, as typified by the officer's particular fervour for retribution. His obsessively fault-finding gaze finally settles on himself, and he offers himself up as the final victim of the death-machine, receiving the commandment "Be just."

Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and asks to be admitted to the law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot at present grant him admittance. The man considers, and then asks whether that means he may be admitted later on. "It is possible," says the doorkeeper, "but not at present." Since the gate leading to the law stands open as always and the doorkeeper steps aside, the man bends down to look through the gateway into the interior. When the doorkeeper sees this he laughs and says: "If it tempts you so, then try entering despite my prohibition. But mark: I am powerful. And I am only the lowest doorkeeper. In hall after hall stand other doorkeepers, each more powerful than the last. The mere sight of the last is more than even I can bear." The man from the country has not expected such difficulties; the law, he thinks, should be accessible to everyone and at all times; but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, at his large pointed nose, his long, sparse, black Tartar beard, he decides that it is better, after all, to wait until he receives permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down to one side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be admitted and wearies the doorkeeper with his entreaties. The doorkeeper often conducts little examinations with him, questioning him about his home and about much else; but they are impersonal questions such as dignitaries ask, and he always concludes by repeating once again that he cannot yet admit him. The man, who has equipped himself well for his journey, uses up all that he has, however valuable it is, in order to bribe the doorkeeper. The latter always accepts everything, but saying as he does so: "I only accept so you won't feel there's anything you haven't tried." Throughout the many years the man observes the doorkeeper almost without interruption. He forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first one seems to him the sole obstacle barring his admission to the law. He curses his misfortune, fiercely and loudly in the early years; later, as he grows old, he merely grumbles away to himself. He becomes childish, and since during his long study of the doorkeeper he has even discovered the fleas in his fur collar, he begs the fleas as well to help him and change the doorkeeper's mind. Finally his sight begins to fail and he does not know whether it is really growing darker around him or whether his eyes are just deceiving him. But he can indeed perceive in the darkness a radiance that streams out unquenchably

from the doorway of the law. Now he has not much longer to live. Before his death all the experiences of the long years assemble in his mind to form a question which he has never yet asked the doorkeeper. He beckons to him since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend down to him, for the difference in height has changed very much to the man's disadvantage. "What is it that you still want to know?" asks the doorkeeper, "you are insatiable." "Surely everyone strives to reach the law," says the man, "how does it happen that for all these many years no one except me has ever asked for admittance?" The doorkeeper recognizes
that the man is at his end, and in order to reach his failing ears he raises his voice and bellows at him: "No one else could ever have been admitted here, since this entrance was intended for you alone. Now I am going to close it."(13)

Before the Law was first published as a short story in its own right, but also appears in Kafka's best-known novel, The Trial. The novel begins as Josef K. is inexplicably arrested on the morning of his thirtieth birthday, "without having done anything wrong." His guards imply that his mere ignorance of the law is enough to prove his guilt. Although under arrest K. is free to continue life as before. He spends much of his time attempting to fathom the mysteries of the legal system, but never gets any closer even to identifying his crime. Finally, while visiting a cathedral he is addressed by a man calling himself the "prison chaplain." This man tells him this parable of the doorkeeper and the man from the country. Despite being thrown into confusion by the contradictory, quasi-Talmudic commentaries offered by the chaplain, K. readily identifies with the man in the story and his struggle to comprehend the law.

From his professional training and his work in an accident insurance office, Kafka was well aware of the iniquities of legal systems. The greatest quality of The Trial is often considered its depiction of the barriers these systems place between the lay individual and justice. Yet it is important to ask ourselves what kind of law Before the Law is chiefly concerned with. The "radiance that streams out unquenchably" from the law may be compared with a prophecy in Isaiah 60:2:

...darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness
the peoples, but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you.

The word "glory" renders the Hebrew "kabod," a word particularly used in the prophecy of divine revelation, equivalent to the Arabic "Bahá'."(14) The symbolism with which the law is invested suggests that the man from the country's quest is to be understood in spiritual terms. Moreover, the closest source for the configuration of the doorkeeper legend is a Midrashic legend, according to which Moses was only permitted to receive the Ten Commandments on Sinai after defeating a succession of increasingly powerful doorkeeper angels.(15) As all German nouns

are capitalized, "law" could equally well be replaced with "Law" in the sense of divine moral law.

Unfortunately for the "man from the country," he is no Moses. In fact his appellation is a literal translation of "am ha'aretz," a Hebrew term for an illiterate Jew unversed in the Law. This name makes his identification with Josef K, who is tormented by his own ignorance of legal matters, even stronger. As we have seen, divine law on the Mosaic model does not only define crime but prescribes righteous actions in every area of daily life. A consequence of the imperfection in human nature is that we cannot rely on our conscience to discern right from wrong. K. may well have sinned unintentionally simply by living his life with no conception of moral law, as suggested by the guard Franz, "he admits to not knowing the law, and at the same time protests his innocence." The Trial thrives on the fear that K may indeed be guilty "without having done anything wrong."

This conclusion readily confirms the message of the other two stories: human beings are unable to deal with their conflicting natures or to act with true justice. It rests on the concept of original sin. Kafka treats this theme explicitly in Aphorisms #83:

We are sinful not only because we have eaten from the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, but because we have not yet eaten of the Tree of Life. We are in a state of sinfulness, irrespective of guilt.

He uses the story of Eden in a very creative way. Instead of suggesting that sin has literally been passed down the generations from a single event in the life of Adam, he gives the elements of the narrative a timeless role in human lives, thus translating original sin into the modern concept of "existential guilt." However, he does not make it clear what he means by the "Tree of Life," any more than did the author of Genesis! 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the term as "the position of the Word of God and the Supreme Manifestation,"(16)
i.e. both the Law itself and the prophet who bears it. This would imply that the sinful state of humanity derives from our failure to receive religious revelation. A related symbol for the Manifestation in Bahá'í scripture is the "Tree beyond which there is no passing," both the boundary and the link between the worlds of God and man. It derives from the Middle Eastern practice of planting a tree to mark the end of a road into a desert. Kafka takes up the same idea (with a twist!) in a comment on the Burning Bush, the revealer of the Word of God, "The thorn-bush has always barred the way. It has to burn if you want to get any further."(17)

Many of Kafka's works are similarly overshadowed by a colossal, unobtainable object, that may or may not take physical form, notably The Castle. Yet its internal workings ultimately prove complex and corrupt like the legal system of The Trial. Yet we only have the doorkeeper's word that this is true of the "Law," which is externally discernible only by its "radiance." This lends it the protean character of a genuine absolute,

suggesting that it may indeed be the kind of symbol of spiritual fulfilment that in other works exists only in a flawed form. Despite his gloomy reputation as the voice of 20th-century despondency, this fulfilment was a very real concept for Kafka. He doubted only its attainment in the modern world:

> We were created to live in paradise, paradise was destined to serve us. Our destiny was changed; that the same thing happened to the destiny of paradise is not stated.(18)

Taking the title Before the Law temporally, some say that the fulfilment promised to the man from the country comes only after death, his passage to eternal life. Yet this reading does not carry well into the novel, where K. dies "like a dog" with no sign of redemption. As the prison chaplain later implies, the man from the country has a real choice: instead of resigning himself to sit and wait for death, he may simply walk past the doorkeeper. He needs only the courage of his conviction that "the law should be accessible to everyone and at all times." The fact that the gate is always open implies that this is indeed the case. Yet he submits piously to religious authority in the figure of the doorkeeper. This caricature of a Jewish scholar of the law, corrupt and flea-ridden, deserves no more respect than the fanatical officer of the penal colony, but the "am ha'aretz" obeys his prohibition.

Almost every society depicted by Kafka is dominated by the concepts of subordinacy and fear of one's superiors. The man from the country readily accepts the myth of the succession of doorkeepers because such a hierarchy is a familiar set-up. He is used to being the humblest member of a community led by clergy, and never finds grounds to doubt the doorkeeper's authority even when it occurs to him that this model has a major fault: there is no community and he is quite alone. He expects everyone to strive to reach the law, as Isaiah envisions nations and kings striving towards the light of the Lord (60:3).

Yet the man from the country fails to realize that nevertheless each has his own entrance to the Law. Each faces his own challenge, tailored to himself. The barriers have no independent existence but, like the legal machinery in the novel, merely mirror the seeker's actions and character. Thus the doorkeeper is the product of the man's willingness to obey a superior authority. In reality he has no moral superior, for in this respect we are "essentially identical."(19) His goal will remain out of reach until he exercises his own spiritual autonomy, yet it is so close that one of the Hidden Words (Persian #7)(20) in the same metaphor could be addressed to him:

> Thou art but one step away from the glorious heights above and from the celestial tree of love. Take thou one step and with the next advance into the immortal realm and enter the pavilion of eternity.

End Notes

This essay won the 1995 ABS-ESE Student Prize for Bahá'í Studies.

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