

The development of this legal system in the successive centuries created what is today known as civil law and common law. It is interesting to note that, according to Abdu'l-Bahá's testimony, Muslim theologians were instrumental in the development of the present day law governing European nations. That law has been directly influenced by Islamic Laws and ordinances.

"... the laws and principles current in all European countries are derived to a considerable degree and indeed virtually in their entirety from the works on jurisprudence and the legal decision of Muslim theologians."(1)

The influence of religious thought and doctrines on the establishment of law and order for the administration of the affairs of society is clearly apparent in the teachings of different religions. It should be noted that certain features of the various religious dispensations have been markedly different. For example, the special sphere of emphasis by some of the religious founders are known to be as follows:

Moses is known as the law giver and the divine laws released by him greatly influenced the community of the faithful for many centuries.

Buddha was a promoter of spirituality with special reference to prayer and meditation for the transformation of humankind. Even now the followers of Buddha put their energies into prayer and meditation as the means of spiritual enrichment.

Christ encouraged love among the believers and the thrust of His mission was individual salvation. Probably that is one of the reasons for the deeply seated love of Christians for the figure of His Holiness Jesus Christ.

Muhammad considered justice the fundamental pre-requisite and means of keeping order amongst the faithful. Hence he revealed His Book of Laws (Quran). Throughout the Islamic dispensation the Muslims rallied around the content and laws of Quran more than the personage of the prophet himself.

Bahá'u'lláh, however, has combined in His Revelation the special features of all the past religions by proclaiming:

* spirituality as a pre-requisite for happiness;

- * love as a fundamental bond and requirement for the unity of human race;
- * law as the means of securing justice within society; and
- * administration of laws through an institutionalised organisation.

In order to bring these principles to reality, Bahá'u'lláh revealed many books, tablets, commentaries, etc. Among these was His Book of Laws, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

The question remains: What is the reason the weighty laws, injunctions, ordinances, guidelines and teachings which constitute divine law and lead nations and societies to the height of their administrative power, and which are effective, just and instrumental in the rise of civilisations, cannot sustain their momentum and subsequently make inevitable the fall of these world renowned civilisations? The study of the failure of these civilisations indicates that almost invariably their collapse was initiated from within.

Great external forces of opposition could not weaken the momentum of these civilisations.

Opposition, in fact, vastly strengthened their bonds and they further expanded. But then

they collapsed suddenly from internal disintegrating forces. The reason for the failure of

civilisations in these instances was that the believers began to disobey religious laws

and eventually lawlessness became a pronounced feature of their religious communities.

It also must be understood that with the coming of new Messengers from God the laws of

the preceding religion became inoperative. One notes that at these times in history many

governments abandon religious laws in favour of civil and man-made ordinances.

This

phenomena is clearly observed after the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh when, for

example numerous laws of Islam became totally non-functional, being replaced by civil law.

Let us for a moment consider the trends and changes in general society in comparison to

that of the Bahá'í community since the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh. Two distinctly apparent processes are taking place, namely:

1. Outside the Bahá'í community:

respect for laws and institutions has diminished steadily and still continues to do so;

peoples' confidence in the future has weakened day by day.

2. Within the Bahá'í community:

respect for laws and institutions has become increasingly stronger as laws have been made binding progressively and the institutions of the Faith gain maturity;

believers' confidence solidifies and their hopes and vision for a better future expand.

In the midst of conflicting opinions, humanity is trying to find answers to such issues

as capital punishment, abortion, homosexuality, treatment of criminals, premarital sexual

relationships, use of hallucinogenic drugs, and the destruction and pollution of the

environment. People suggest vastly different remedies to these problems. A fundamental

difficulty in offering solutions is that the problems are basically global in principle

while almost exclusively the solutions are regional or national in scope. It seems that

what is needed in this age, or for that matter in any era, is the existence of an

undisputed standard, firm benchmark or authority which is wholeheartedly accepted by all.

History shows that one such standard is repeatedly established by the undisputed authority

of the messengers of God for the period of their successive dispensations.

Bahá'ís

believe that this standard or point of reference is established by

Bahá'u'lláh

for this age of human evolution in the body of His revelation, particularly in His Book of

Laws, the Most Holy Book of Bahá'í Dispensation, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. This Book is

referred to by the Universal House of Justice as the channel to:

"... serve the manifold purpose of bringing tranquillity to human society, raising

the standard of human behaviour, increasing the range of human understanding, and

spiritualising the life of each and all."(2)

The laws and ordinances specified in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, like the compilation of Divine

Law of other religions, basically contain two parts. One is spiritual in nature and the other is material in principle. This topic has been explained in detail by `Abdu'l-Bahá and a brief extract from his discourse referring to it is recorded below:

"... the Law of God is divided into two parts. One is the fundamental basis which comprises all spiritual things - that is to say, it refers to spiritual virtues and divine qualities; this does not change nor alter the second part refers to the material world this part of the Law of God is modified and altered in each prophetic cycle in accordance with the necessities of the times." (3)

An example of the statement by the Universal House of Justice referred to above (2) was the spiritualisation and dramatic transformation of the standards and behaviour of the Persian Bahá'ís subsequent to the distribution of this mighty Book during the remaining years of the Ministry of Bahá'u'lláh and the years immediately following His ascension. Although the release of the laws and contents of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas to the Persian Bahá'í community was gradual and stage by stage, yet there was a profound transformation of the community of the faithful and the spiritual and behavioural characteristics of the community were elevated individually as well as collectively from one level to a much higher plateau. It was clearly understood by the early believers, in the light of the statement by `Abdu'l-Bahá that the:

"... laws of God are not impositions of will, or of power, or pleasure, but the resolution of truth, reason and justice ..." (4)

The significance of the Divine Law may be best demonstrated by the study of the existing state of the society and comparison of some of the features of the Divine Law to that of civil or sectarian law. Sin or wrongdoing is not the speciality of our time.

Throughout history, man has committed sins and will continue to attempt to do so in the future. If we examine the community around us we find that the general mentality of many people is that nothing is illegal until one gets caught. Offenders are not penalised if not caught when breaking the laws. In fact, the praiseworthy attitude that "the

means

justify the end" is substituted by the well known phrase "the end justifies the means". Many people are willing to commit any act of wrongdoing in the course of

their endeavours to achieve their materialistic goals in life. One reason for this type of

attitude may be the fact that our society is fundamentally governed by man-made laws and

principles. These are always open to dispute and debate in the light of the lack of

authoritative Divine Laws and in view of the fact that there is no unique value system

imposed. It is often found that the implementation of the law is exercised with varying

degrees of severity for a similar wrong doing. The basic problem is that what one person

considers illegal, another considers perfectly legitimate. That is why we find society,

including our law makers and law enforcement agencies, in the midst of confusing dilemmas

about the proper treatment of certain issues. One nation advocates capital punishment,

another opposes it; one nation legalises homosexuality, another abhors it; one country

encourages abortion, another prevents it; one society accepts euthanasia, another rejects

it; and so on and so forth. These contrasting opinions result in the continuous and

repeated confrontation between enforcement agencies and the public all over the world.

This trend of behaviour has created chaos in the world. That chaos is often associated

with destruction and damage to property, criminal acts and world-wide dissatisfaction of

citizens. How can we make this world a better place to live with this kind of value

system? There are several aspects of man-made laws which make them inadequate for the

regulation and control of order in the society; namely:

Lack of absolute and unquestionable authority.

Dependence largely on external agencies for enforcement.

The absence of a unique value system.

Territorial nature of laws while facing global problems.

Limitation and constraints by the dimension of time - laws generally based on

past experiences.

Lack of spiritual values - the spiritual dimension and its contribution is not considered when formulating laws.

Secular laws are determined through a debate process rather through a single absolute authority.

Laws are fundamentally based on punishment alone rather than on both reward and retribution.

Man-made laws are enforced with compromise. Some even advocate education rather than punishment.

The Divine Law on the other hand avoids all of the above deficiencies. It has on the contrary the following strengths:

It enjoys the authority of God Himself.

It enshrines the enforcement factor within it.

It introduces a uniform and unique value system and establishes the standard or benchmark.

It is universal in nature - it applies everywhere equally.

It contains a vision of future and experience of the past, because of the all-encompassing knowledge of God.

It is endowed and revealed with a special spiritual potency and significance.

The authority of Divine Law is a single unerring source which flows through the channel of the Manifestation of God and not through debate and man's logic.

Acceptance and obedience to the Divine Law insures reward, spiritual as well as material, and its rejection warrants punishment in both worlds.

Divine laws are applied with justice and are entirely free of compromise.

Bahá'u'lláh established His laws and principles as a firm and unshakeable foundation for the establishment of a new global civilisation. His Most Holy Book, the

Kitáb-i-Aqdas, and eight other Tablets revealed by Him as a supplement to this Book

contain all the above-mentioned factors plus many other significant topics.

These eight

Tablets are outlined by Shoghi Effendi as follows:

"... the establishment of subsidiary ordinances designed to supplement the provisions of His Most Holy Book, which He continued to reveal until the last days of His

earthly life, among which the "Ishraqat" (Splendours), the "Bisharat" (Glad Tidings), the "Tarazat" (Ornaments), the "Tajalliyat" (Effulgence), the "Kalimat-i-Firdawsiyyih" (Words of Paradise), the "Lawh-i- Aqdas"

(Most Holy Tablet), the "Lawh-i-Dunya" (Tablet of the World), the "Lawh-i-Maqsud" (Tablet of Maqsud) are the most noteworthy." (5)

He has introduced many principles in His Most Holy Book and its supplementary Tablets

and recorded divine laws as constraints and conditions for achieving these principles. In

fact Shoghi Effendi refers to the distinction between principles and laws and writes

however, that they constitute:

"The warp and woof of the institutions upon which the structure of His World Order

must ultimately rest." (6)

`Abdu'l-Bahá in a Tablet states that any laws revealed elsewhere in the Writings of

Bahá'u'lláh which are contrary to the laws of the Aqdas, are invalid. (7)

The introduction of the new divinely ordained laws in every religious dispensation has

been gradual and successive. Every Manifestation of God had to prepare the faithful for

the acceptance of divine laws which were contrary to their traditional beliefs and habits.

An example of this is the prohibition of the consumption of intoxicating drinks in Islam

by Prophet Muhammad. In successive stages he first referred to disadvantages of these

drinks, later on He forbade those who were drunk to participate in congregational prayer

and eventually he denounced drinking categorically in His Book of Laws, the Quran.

Likewise, Bahá'u'lláh revealed His laws in progressive stages.

Bahá'ís

believe that there are two types of progressive revelation as outlined below:

The Messengers of God appear at different ages in a progressive course to guide mankind.

The revelation of laws and ordinances of each Messenger is unveiled in a progressive and gradual process.

The coming of Bahá'u'lláh completed another link in the chain of progressive revelation by Messengers of God. When He revealed laws and ordinances He

released them to the believers in a gradual process. For example, some time after the

revelation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh instructed one of the early believers to copy certain passages from it and share them with the friends in

Persia.

Bahá'u'lláh also advised Haji Siyyid Javad, another one of the early believers, that the implementation of His laws should be gradual, discrete and wise.

The enforcement of the laws of Kitáb-i-Aqdas and its supplementary Tablets began with

Shoghi Effendi initially to the Persian believers mainly because they were familiar with

religious laws, and he advised the Spiritual Assemblies to take into account some of these

laws and never compromise in the application of justice. Later on he referred to the

universal applicability of some of Bahá'u'lláh's laws in a letter on his behalf

to the Western believers:

".... certain laws, such as fasting, obligatory prayers, the consent of parents before marriage, avoidance of alcoholic drinks, monogamy, should be regarded by all

believers as universally and vitally applicable at the present time" (8)

Bahá'u'lláh laid his laws and principles as a firm foundation for the establishment of a new global civilisation. His most holy book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas

contains essentially relevant factors of the Divine Law such as authority, enforcement,

universality, spirituality, vision, value system, and so on. A brief account of this

mighty book follows for the information of readers.

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas was revealed in the Arabic language (about 1873) after Bahá'u'lláh was released from Akka prison and was living in the house of Udi

Khammar. The Writings of Bahá'u'lláh are either in Arabic or in Persian or in

a combination of these two languages. He refers to Arabic as the language of "elegance" and to Persian as the language of "light". Arabic is

believed by linguists to be grammatically one of the most perfect languages in the world.

Fadil-i-Mazindaran, a Persian Bahá'í scholar, has categorised the Writings of

Bahá'u'lláh into nine different styles, namely:

Tablets with language of command and majesty

Tablets with a patient, humble, and supplicating tone

Writings with explanation of the works of previous manifestations

Revelation of laws and ordinances

The mystical writings

Tablets to the Kings and Rulers and those related to administration

Writings related to scientific fields such as life, health, medicine, etc

Tablets concerning Bahá'í character and life

Writings related to the principles of society - social teachings and education

Many of the above styles are present in the revelation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas and its supplementary Tablets.

This Book has three distinct and important features as outlined below:

It is entirely written by the author of the Dispensation Himself.

It contains laws and ordinances for the spiritual growth of humanity as well as the fabric of his future world order.

Ordains the function of interpretation to his successor.

This relatively small Book of approximately 10,000 words has a related compilation of

105 items called the "Questions and Answers". The significance of this Book should not be judged by its size. Bahá'u'lláh says:

"This Book is a heaven which we have adorned with the stars of our commandments and prohibitions ... so vast is its range that it hath encompassed all men ere their recognition of it. Ere long will its sovereign power, its pervasive influence and the greatness of its might be manifest on earth". (10)

Bahá'u'lláh alluded to this mighty Book previously in the Kitáb-i-Iqan (The Book of Certitude) and Shoghi Effendi has referred to it as "The Charter of New World Order". A charter is defined as a document conferring rights and privileges upon an individual or a group of people.

Bahá'u'lláh refers to this document as:

* "The breath of life unto all created things."

* "The mightiest stronghold".

* "The fruits of His `Tree".

* "The highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its people".

* "The lamps of His wisdom and loving providence".

* "The `key' of His mercy".

He has furthermore deliberately left gaps in the laws and ordinances of this Book to be filled in future by the Universal House of Justice, which, as He Himself has attested is an infallible and unerring body. These gaps would provide mobility and the required flexibility in application of Divine Law. They allow the possibility of implementation of laws when timely. He says that "Laws of God are like unto the ocean and children of men as fish". They create a society which is essential for survival.

Let us conclude this presentation with a profound statement by the Author of this Most Holy Book.

"Think not that we have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, we have unsealed the choice wine with the fingers of might and power". (11)

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