

Civility and Piety as Foundations of Community

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Good morning, everybody. I must say it gladdens my heart, if I can use such a timeworn phrase, to be part of these proceedings. I have read quite a few of the Bahá'í documents, and I found myself very much in sympathy with a great deal that has been said. I cannot claim to be “spiritually learned,” but perhaps I can suggest that in a small way I have been “spiritually musical”—that’s not quite the same thing.

I have tried, through most of my work in sociology, to connect up the practical side of life—the way organizations are run, the way our legal systems are constructed, the way our theories of human nature are understood—I’ve tried to connect all these things up with the animating principles, the values, the moral commitments that people can and should make. And it is by keeping in the forefront these moral commitments that we can better understand all of these aspects of life. It seems to me—not everyone would agree with this, of course—that this has made me a better sociologist, better able to see what goes on in people’s lives: what moves them, what troubles them, what makes our institutions work properly, and what makes them fail dismally as they so often do.

Perhaps I could lighten this discourse a bit by telling a little story, not a long story. It’s about a young man who was twenty-two years old in 1941—an intense, somewhat skinny young man. He was always asking people to “Be serious!” And of course his young acquaintances and comrades were not going to be all that serious, but he would wag his tongue and his finger a bit at them and sometimes they would

listen to him. Now this young man, at the age of twenty-two, was going through a rather intense moral experience. He had been associated for several years with a young socialist organization, and he had left and was more or less on his own in 1941 and was trying to solve the riddle of socialism: the difficulties that socialist ideals represent in a world that was so full of greed and power and self-aggrandizement. He turned from the orthodoxies of Marxism, and even of liberal thought, to much that he found useful in modern theology.

The secret is out: that young man was named Philip.

I was very young, but I thought that I ought to take ideas very seriously. I loved ideas; perhaps I was a bit intoxicated by them. But in trying to understand, in trying to deal with this, the dilemmas of socialist idealism, I turned to some theological writings, especially the work of the great Christian theologian of the twentieth century, Reinhold Niebuhr, also Paul Tillich, and a few others, all of whom were trying to say something important about the dilemmas of human experience.

I'll just mention a couple of the things that I learned from this theological understanding. One was—and this seemed to be really relevant—it was very easy for human beings to do evil in the name of the good, to do things that were wrong and hurtful and oppressive, while also pleading that they belonged to a noble world and they were pursuing a noble cause. These writings pointed up the danger of doing evil in the name of the good, and they associated it with the sin of idolatry, “idolatry” being, roughly speaking, the association of absolute good with a movement, a party, oneself—as a young person or as a parent or what have you—the worship of something that is contingent and limited as if it were absolute.

One of the things we learned was that this failure to understand limitations, this failure to understand the likelihood of doing evil, of making terrible mistakes, moral mistakes, in the course of trying to do something good—all that was ordinary theological understanding, understanding that had been going on for a long time. And I took it to my heart. Another

theological principle—and I'll mention only this one—has to do with the relationship between power and perfection.

It came to me gradually, not as in a blinding light, but only over time, that one had to understand the ways of God to man, and that way is mainly this: to see that only in God can there be a union of power and perfection. Only in God, or at least the idea of God, is there a sense that there are no limits, that there is absolutely disinterested love, that there is perfection in motivation, and that therefore unlimited power can be assumed.

The corollary of that is that no *human* being and no *human* institution can represent the union of power and perfection. It is not given to us as human beings to be all-powerful or to presume that we are all-perfect. Rather, we recognize that all human institutions must be limited in some way, and above all limited by our understanding of what moral ideals call for.

And so when we speak of democratic majorities, or when we say that "we should follow the will of the people," it is for us to ask, How should that will be governed? Is not the will of the people also something that is subordinate to some higher law, some higher principle which will criticize that will and which will limit that will? So, too, in my thinking and writings on the sociology of law, I have taken it for granted that law is not its own justification, that no act of a legislature, no judicial opinion, can ever really have the last word; that there is always something else to be said, some principle to be invoked, some way of thinking that will point us to some new road, some new path, some new way of thinking about justice. The work of justice is never done and that means also that the power of people who say they speak in the name of justice is never an unlimited power; it is always limited by some appeal to the higher principles of justice.

These are some of the things that this young man learned from his reading of theology, from his effort to think seriously about the limits of social idealism, the limits of any effort to try to change the world. Now, of course, this does not mean that a twenty-two-year-old would fail to

take seriously all of his ideas. He took those ideas very seriously indeed. He was skinny but he thought he had broad shoulders, and he thought he could carry the world on those shoulders. In time, I'm happy to say, he mellowed. In time, he came to see his own limitations. In time, he came to see that he ought to stop and think before he speaks. He doesn't always do that even now, but he tries it sometimes.

What I'm trying to say with this little story is that my efforts to be spiritually musical, to take seriously the thinking that has gone on about the vindication of, as Alexander Pope said, the ways of God to man, of the implications all that has for the way we think about morality and society—this is not something that is new to me, not something that has not become part of my life. Now it may seem very strange indeed to hear a Berkeley sociologist—a *Berkeley* sociologist!—say things like this, and yet, thank God we have had academic freedom, we have been able to pursue the truth as God gives us to see the truth.

In recent years I have been trying to understand better the phenomenon we call *community*—this is a word that is familiar to all of you—and I've tried to understand this in a way that takes account of both the changes in social reality, the ways social life is organized, and the ideals that we associate with community.

I have resisted the temptation to answer the question, Is *this* a community? Is *that* a community? but rather to say that all groups are communities *insofar as* they do certain things: insofar as they are, they take account of, and try to deal with a broad range of interests and ideals; insofar as they take account of and respond to people as whole persons—as living, responding individuals who have their own needs and their own problems; insofar as we can see ideals of caring and mutual concern manifested in the experience of the group. So the idea of community, as we say in social science, is variable. It's not all or none. And that has very important implications because it suggests that the idea of community and the values that we associate with community can be found in many different settings. We can look for community in a conference of this kind; we can look for community in a family; we can look

for community in a Boy Scout troop; we can look for community in the classroom; we can look for community in a law school or university, or what have you; we can look for community in a nation, and we may find it only to some extent.

Our problem is how to deepen and enrich the experience of community. Therefore the idea of community, like the idea of love, can be applied in many different settings. And we say that human beings ought to obey the law of love not because they can love everything in the same way but because the ideals we associate, we experience, with loving—of concern, of caring, of interdependence—these ideals can be found and made manifest in many different ways and in many different aspects of life.

I would venture to say that if there is a public philosophy associated with the intellectual discipline we call sociology, that public philosophy is this one: it is the public philosophy of enriching and enhancing community, of trying to discover ways of reconciling differences. It is a public philosophy that says you have to do the best you can to see that people live together in harmony and mutual concern and respect. And so I have come up with something I call the principle of community, which I have formulated as *the union of solidarity and respect*.

It is not solidarity alone that makes for community because we can have solidarity enforced by commands that really have contempt for the people who are commanded. On the other hand, we can have a solidarity which takes seriously the individuality and diversity and uniqueness of all of the components of the community, whether they are particular groups or families or whether they are individuals. It is this principle of community that seems to be what we have to try to pursue and to see how far we can pursue it in the various contexts of our lives. In thinking about community, I've tried also to understand some dilemmas of community, dilemmas and ambiguities we sometimes turn away from, but which we must recognize forthrightly and try to deal with.

These thoughts have led me to consider the connection between two ideas I'd just like to spend a few minutes on today. One is the idea of

civility, and the other is *piety*. These are not unfamiliar ideas: we all use them from time to time. But it's important to see how they are separate and how they are connected. Civility can have a very narrow meaning: it can mean simply that someone else is speaking and we ought to be quiet and listen. And it might mean just being quiet and *not* listening—just taking turns. You have your turn and I have my turn and that doesn't mean we listen to each other.

That kind of civility is an aspect of public life which asks us to take account of our diversity—of potential conflict—which asks us, above all, to honor a principle of respect, so that we say we respect other people when we don't ask them too many embarrassing questions; we respect other people when we are reticent and quiet and withhold criticisms and we don't say everything that comes into our heads. We say, well, the situation requires that we be polite and show good manners: that's being civil. Or it may be, being civil is an aspect of our lives as public citizens, so that being civil means that we take seriously the principles of our community and relate to them. But you can be civil and you can honor civility and be respectful in a somewhat cool way, and you might say that civility is a principle that is rather more cool than hot. It's not so much an expression of passion; it's more an expression of restraint: don't talk too much, don't talk out of turn; line up; be good for goodness' sakes. All these things are part of civility.

But think again more seriously about civility. Suppose we go from trying to take turns to really understanding one another. The more we embrace the principle of shared understanding, the more we try to see other people as people to whom we must communicate in some deep way—at the extreme, of course, is the experience of loving someone else, of understanding that other person in a deep way, of responding to that other person's needs and concerns and feelings, of *caring* about those feelings and not just "respecting" them. Once you move in that direction and you move from listening to *really* listening, then we see that civility asks much more of us, and indeed may be also a deeper foundation of community.

Even civility in the sense in which I talked about it a moment ago, the narrow sense of taking turns and watching your tongue and not embarrassing people, and so on—even that can help us form communities because it can say we aren't going to say things or do things that will cast people out or that will make them uncomfortable and unhappy in our presence and therefore they will say, "I don't belong here; I'm going to go somewhere else." No, the more we show respect for people, the more likely it is that they will stand with us and feel that they belong, and if not belong, at least they are tolerated, and if they are tolerated they can be members. And so we say that all *members* of the American community, all *persons*, are entitled to the equal protection of the law; all *persons* are entitled to due process of law; all *persons* are entitled to the respect and good will of their fellow citizens. It's still just civility.

Many of you, I suppose, have thought something about the ideas of liberalism. If you look at much that goes by the name of liberal theory, liberal thought, today, the focus really is on civility. The focus is on creating a world which can go forward and be sustained despite the fact that we have differences and we have different opinions. We have different ways of thinking and yet we belong together and should be together as citizens, therefore, as it were, we bracket our own special views. We say those are not the views that will move us today, but rather we will organize society in a liberal fashion so as to take account of these differences and allow us to live together despite our differences. This is the liberal ethos.

Liberalism has not done so well with the other side of the coin, the other principle I want to mention, and that is the principle of piety. Piety is a word that again can have a very narrow meaning, so that, for example, we simply may say the best example of piety, many people would say, is filial piety, that is, being caring about, respectful of, and indeed obeying your parents; filial piety is the reverence and the respect that is accorded by children to their parents. George Santayana, the philosopher, put it this way once: he said piety in its nobler sense is *the reverent attachment a person has to the sources of his being*. This means that piety has

to do with loyalty, with attachment, with commitment in the sense of the union of self and other, of the union of self and group, of the union of self and God, if you like.

Piety is a principle that encourages the commitment of people one to another in a spirit of likemindedness, in a spirit that sociologists used to call a consciousness of kind, of belonging to one another. It begins of course with kinship, with biology, but is extended to larger communities and also to the groups of which we are a part.

But you can have piety with respect to many different kinds of groups in one form or another. You can have piety as a member of the faculty of the University of California. You can have piety in which you take seriously the fact of your membership and that we are, in some sense, in all this together and we share a common history, and we share in some sense a common fate. And this sense of sharing a common commitment and history and fate is at the root of piety because it's this sharing of history and of fate, and so on, that makes us feel that we know who we are. And knowing who we are helps us to appreciate the reach as well as the limits of our attachments. You know that some attachments are very important to us; we give our lives for those attachments. Other attachments, of course, are less important, and yet they make a great deal of difference to us; they define for us our authentic selves.

Authenticity and piety and sharing of history—these are not aspects of life that appeal very much to the liberal mind because these are aspects of life that emphasize what we have in common, what we share, how we belong together, and the more we create in our communities a sense of that mutual belonging, the more we will want to embrace ideals of piety.

I want to say that piety and civility are not really so opposed as one might think. I said before that if you make a transition from taking turns and listening and then clapping—going through these externals—to a situation in which you listen seriously and intently and create an atmosphere and an experience in which everyone shares in whatever it might be: a spiritual, or intellectual, or for that matter a musical, experience—

if you move in that direction, you're likely to create communities, people who think together and belong together.

Consider, for example, how we might think about an ecumenical meeting of people of different religions. I don't mean just different churches, but people of different religions, people who begin with some sharing of an appreciation of spirituality—they may be spiritually learned or only spiritually musical but what they are is alert to the spiritual dimension of our lives. These people, if they get together and talk about their understandings of faith and God and moral truth, if they exchange views about these things and do so with open hearts and open minds, they're likely to create communities of shared understanding, and so there will be some element of piety that develops out of the experience of civility. What may begin as narrow or constricted civility becomes a richer and deeper piety. And it's the connection between those that seems to be so important.

But there is another and perhaps darker and more chilling way of thinking about this connection. As you can see from the way I've talked about this, I would generally say that piety is a good thing, just as love is a good thing. But it's not an *absolute* good thing. There are dangers—moral dangers. It is a good, but we can do evil in the name that good. And we can do evil in the name of piety—when piety takes the form of exclusiveness, when piety takes the form of a claim to privileged truth; when piety takes form of a claim to privileged salvation, when piety takes the form of an attack on others as damned and outside the pale and destined for hell. When piety takes this exclusive form, when it becomes wrapped up with justifications for hatred and bigotry and violence, then piety becomes something less than a good thing. Piety becomes something that threatens humanity and makes us all fearful and concerned. And so I think that piety that is divorced from civility is likely to lead us down a very wrong path indeed.

And I'm happy to learn, as I have learned about the Bahá'í Faith, that the emphasis there is precisely on resisting these potential evils of piety. I don't think it can ever be completely forsworn because it is part of the

dynamics of group life that we think of ourselves as somehow better than others and we find it difficult to embrace the virtues of humility and self-transcendence that seem to be so required by a better understanding of piety.

Let's go back for a moment to George Santayana's definition: the reverent attachment to the sources of one's being. Now, it's interesting that this reverent attachment generalizes the idea of piety—and of course we should not be surprised that a philosopher would want to generalize: sometimes they do it well and sometimes not so well. But as Santayana was saying, the reverent attachment to the sources of one's being: that could mean, of course, attachment to principles and not just to a particular group or institution. It might lead us to ask, Who are we? What are the principles we live by? What are our articles of faith?

All that would be consistent with the idea of piety as reverent attachment to the sources of one's being because it still leaves open the question of what *are* the sources of one's being? Is it the way we were brought up? Is it what our parents were like? Is it the books we have read? Is it the lectures we have given, the endless classes we have met? Are they what define ourselves as authentic human beings in the world? Is patriotism an example of this reverent attachment to the sources of one's being? Well, it might be, if by "patriotism" we mean not necessarily "my country right or wrong" but "these are the principles my country is and should be committed to, and these principles provide us with criteria for assessment and criticism of what our country has done."

I mentioned earlier that (I won't say how many years ago, but that you can figure that out for yourself), when I was twenty-two I took seriously some of the ideas that were being presented in at least some kinds of Christian theology. Now, when I was writing a book called *The Moral Commonwealth*—it came out about ten years ago—a funny thing happened to me. It begins bravely with a chapter on naturalism and ethics, with a strong defense of the views of my intellectual father, or maybe grandfather, but perhaps father is best—John Dewey, who always took the view that our moral understandings are based upon our understanding of what people are like, of what institutions are like, what frailties

they have, what vulnerabilities they have, what aspirations they might properly have, on our understanding of what we must guard against in human affairs, and also our understanding of what we can aspire to in human affairs. For most of my life I've always thought of myself as a devoted follower of John Dewey's humanist pragmatism. I began that book with a, I wouldn't say ringing, but an affirmative explication of those ideas, and as I was coming to the end of the project—a long project indeed; too long for the patience of most people—I had a different vision, or should I say a corollary vision. It was this: if we want to think about a moral commonwealth, about the moral community, we have to understand the difference between *knowing* something and *accepting and acting* on something.

We might well agree that the naturalist view, the view that rejects really all the supernatural claims and tries to see all of our understandings, including our moral understandings, as rooted in the strivings and limits of human experience—we see that naturalist claim points us to the ways we should think about *knowing*, about what people sometimes call *cognition*, about what it means to know and to justify certain principles. But the more I thought and the more I scribbled—I shouldn't say that because I didn't scribble; I used a computer and I did what most people do when they write: they rewrite. As I wrote and rewrote—perhaps I should put it that way—I came to a better understanding of the importance for human experience, and for human communities, of making commitments, of having, if I may say so, articles of faith.

There is a difference between knowing something abstractly, having the psychic competence or ability, and having the resolve to do something about it, to accept your commitment—commitment to other people, commitment to the groups to which you belong, commitment to your life's work, commitment to marriage, commitment to your children—commitment to all of these things—they're all lining up, and it's an endless line, but there it is. Our lives are made up of commitments, but we have to be able to make those commitments, and communities have to make those commitments. And so I concluded this book with a chapter which I called "Covenant and Commonwealth." I find myself

again going back to ideas that are rooted in religious experience and religious thought, that is, the notion of covenant: the notion that we enter into solemn obligations—in religious imagery, we enter into obligations or treaties (another word for covenant), with God or whatever may be the source of our moral being—such that the outcome is that we have embraced certain articles of faith. These articles of faith cannot be dismissed as figments of our imagination or illusions that people have, because they are what drive us and organize us and help us to arrange our lives.

It may not always be easy to explain. For example, perhaps the greatest article of faith to which most of us here are committed might be called moral equality—not necessarily complete social equality but moral equality, as Lincoln said in 1863 at Gettysburg, “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Of course there was a bit of slippage there—by “men” he meant all men and women—but “dedicated to the proposition” means embracing as an article of faith that every human being has intrinsic worth, and therefore every human being has at some point to be treated as an end and not as a means, or, as Kant said, not as a means only. Of course we do treat people as means; we treat them as human resources in business and in the military and so on and so forth. But the great difference between a moral institution or a moral community and one that is not one, is that, in the end, ways will be found to honor the principle of moral equality, to say that this person deserves deference and respect as a human being.

Now it is not easy to explain exactly why we should embrace such an idea. We might say, as I myself believe, that the best explanation is really a negative explanation. We think: if we don't have such a proposition, if we don't have that article of faith, then some very bad things happen. We unleash all kinds of potentialities for people to have contempt for one another, to harm one another in important ways, and it is this negative argument that seems to work best. We have other reasons, I suppose, that there ought to be moral equality because we know that all human beings, high or low, learned or not, spiritually learned or spiritually musical, any

one of them, every single person, is an example of frail humanity. Every such person can know sin in one way or another, and every such person can aspire to redeem himself and can do something about that fall from grace, and in that sense we are all alike: in that sense we have moral equality. Whether or not we would still accept that as a completely convincing explanation of why we are so dedicated is not so clear. President Lincoln didn't have to answer that question as he was giving a short speech and he was finished in a couple of minutes. And anyway it wasn't up to him to do that.

And so we don't really have to answer that question, but we do have to recognize that we can't have effective human communities without articles of faith: that means, without covenants, without agreements that we make to one another and to whatever principles we think govern our lives, without a sense that these are commitments we have made and will stand by—they are who we are and they are the sources of our being.

Let me put it this way: civility is naked without articles of faith, which tell us who we are and what we live by—naked and empty; civility is formal, arid, unsupported by deep feelings. On the other hand, piety without civility is debased and out of control. I think you know what I mean by that and I don't need to expatiate upon it. Without civility, without a principle of respect, allows our passions to run wild and especially the passions that we have that stem from our attachments and our special loyalties.

I suppose the larger message that I have, if I have a message, is that it is important for us to recognize that this kind of distinction—there might be many others we could explore—between civility and piety is not just an academic exercise. Neither is it something that it is given to us to reconcile easily and without pain. It requires our most earnest efforts and our thoughts and commitments in order to see that there is a continuing source of trouble and difficulty, something that we have to look into our own hearts to deal with and to assuage. It is a difficulty which makes our lives not trouble free but troubled—now and, I think, forever. And it is this trouble that we all have to recognize and to accept.

If we aren't willing to do that, it means we haven't quite seen the dilemmas and ambiguities of our human lives. I thank you very much for listening.

NOTE

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