

[Based on the version published in the Journal of Church & State, 1999 Autumn, pages 697-724. The anglicized spelling Bahai has been introduced, and macrons marking the long vowels in transliterated names and terms have been removed. A few updates on subsequent publications, to April 2012, are noted at the end.]

A theology of the state from the Baha'i teachings

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Religious communities of the Western traditions have models of ideal social structures under divine rule: *eschatological models* (the Kingdom of God to be created by the messiah); *metaphysical models* (in which entities such as angels, prophets, the Hidden Imam and the souls of the departed interact with the world and one another; and *ecclesiological models* (the church as the body of Christ, or the community of the Islamic faithful reflecting the community of Medina). There are clearly connections between these models. One could speak of a single model projected into three dimensions: the messianic future, the metaphysical, and the community itself.

Religious communities also have immediate goals in societies governed by state institutions, and therefore have to have at least implicit theologies of the state. These serve as models of what 'the state' is and should be doing, and what they as religious communities are doing when they are relating to the state. While there is broad congruence between pictures of the Kingdom of God throughout the Western religious traditions, there is a radical divergence in theologies of the state. These differences are possible because the state is absent in theological models of the Kingdom of God and (excluding some short-lived theocratic states) is by definition external to the religious community's ecclesiological model. The state may be seen as evil, as an evil wisely ordained for a wicked time, or as the 'secular arm' performing the will of the church by other means. It may be baptised, reformed or overturned, but it cannot be truly good, because in these models of the truly good society, there is no state. So while theologies of the state exist, they are at best loosely related to the communities' systematic theologies and therefore highly variable. And because the state also knows that there is no room for a state in the Kingdom, the relationships between churches and states cannot be more than tactical. Where true acceptance is withheld on one side, trust cannot be given on the other.

For these reasons, and given the importance that church-state theories have assumed in Islamicist rhetoric vis-a-vis the West, the model of church-state relationships in the Baha'i scriptures is especially interesting. Coming from the Islamic world itself, the Baha'i Faith presents a justification of the separation of church and state going far beyond those produced in the West. Millennialist in origin, and still occupying a peripheral position in most countries, its scriptures present stronger arguments for the rights of the state than can be found even in the theologies of established churches. From the position that the Messiah has come and the eschaton has been initiated in the life of Baha'u'llah (b. Iran 1817, d. Haifa 1892), the Baha'i Faith presents an eschatological model in which the state is not rendered redundant by the coming of the Messiah, but rather has been blessed and guided by that Coming.

In this version of the Kingdom of God there is a state, and principles governing its relationship with the religious order. Social institutions manifest metaphysical realities, and the principles governing church-state relationships are believed to reflect "the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things", which in turn reflect the nature of God. The state, or at least the platonic reality that it exists to manifest, is found even in the Kingdom in Heaven. Moreover the relationship of organic unity between differentiated institutions of church and state corresponds to the differentiated organic structure of the ideal Baha'i community: political theology matches ecclesiology. Finally, the same pattern is found in the integration of diverse attributes and multiple citizenships in the human person. Thus the differentiation of church and state in Baha'i political theology is related to metaphysics, eschatology, ecclesiology and anthropology, as variations on one theme, and this theme in itself has a clear relationship to the *kerygma* of the Baha'i teachings, which is unity. Indeed the separation of church and state sometimes appears in lists of the 'basic Baha'i principles',¹ something which has no parallel to

¹ Usually under the header of 'non-involvement in politics', which is a misunderstanding. Lists of Baha'i principles which include this principle derive from a talk given by 'Abdu'l-Baha as reported in *Khitabat-i 'Abdu'l-Baha*, Hofheim-Langenhain, Baha'i-Verlag, 1984, p. 176. 'Abdu'l-Baha's primary theme here is the positive involvement of believers in the process of government, with the proviso that religious and political affairs should nevertheless be kept separate. The modification of this teaching to accord with the millennialist views of the Baha'i community can be traced in successive versions in *Star of the West*, 3:2 April 1912, page 7 and *Paris Talks*, London,

my knowledge in Western millennialist movements. An additional reason for interest is that this teaching is argued, and not simply revealed as the divine fiat, and it is argued in neoplatonic terms which are a common language for Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Perhaps the argument will prove transferable.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Baha'i Faith originated in a Shi'ih millenarian movement founded by Mirza `Ali Muhammad Shirazi, "the Bab" [pronounced *Baab*], in Iran in 1844. The stance of the Bab himself towards state authority is complex and need not trouble us here. Amanat, in the conclusions to his remarkable history of the Babi movement, says that:

The Babi theory, on the other hand, recognized, at least in principle, the *du jure* legitimacy of the temporal rulers as the protectors of the true religion. The Bab envisaged himself as a prophet, not a ruler; his misgivings about the state were directed at the conduct of the government rather than its legitimacy. ... Most Babis shared the observance of this duality of religious and political spheres.²

However some of his disciples, including many of the `ulama, regarded the state as illegitimate, and prepared themselves for the prophesied eschatological battle between good and evil -- with the forces of the state and monarch not being ranged on the side of the angels. This is entirely in line with Shi'ih millenarian views.

The Babi uprisings brought disaster on the community. Their suppression in Iran and the execution of some leading Babis, including the Bab himself (1850), left the movement in need of leadership and a new direction. This was provided by one leading disciple, Mirza Husayn `Ali Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1912, Eleventh edition 1972, pp. 157--160. In the end it is the editorial additions of the latter (the chapter heading and the phrase 'in the present state of the world') which have passed into Baha'i lore, as part of a scheme in which Baha'is withdraw from the unclean world of politics and look forward to a cataclysmic change. This is more or less the opposite of the point `Abdu'l-Baha makes in the original.

² Amanat, A., *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844 -- 1850*, Ithaca and London, Cornell University Press, 1989. p. 407.

Nuri, known as Baha'u'llah, who led the great majority of the former Babi community from his successive exiles in the Ottoman provinces of Iraq (1853-63), Rumelia (1863-68) and Palestine (1868-92).

Baha'u'llah adopted the policy of restraining the community from most immediate political involvement. However his extensive teachings on the subject of representative democracy and the demands of good governance could not but be seen as critical of the absolutist monarchies of his time in both Ottoman lands and his native Persia.³ He sought constructive interaction, not confrontation. As Cole says, "He desired, by recognizing the legitimacy of the secular state, to achieve the position of spiritual counsellor for it."⁴ However Cole's historical approach does not bring out Baha'u'llah's strong theological justification for the existence of the state and its separation from the religious authorities. The change in direction of the Babi community which Baha'u'llah achieved represents a decisive theological break with the theoretical (and sometimes actual) denial of state authority in Shi'ih doctrine, rather than a tactical response to the overwhelming strength of the state. Bayat has said that Baha'u'llah "embraced what no Muslim sect, no Muslim school of thought ever succeeded in or dared to try: the doctrinal acceptance of the de facto secularization of politics which had occurred in the Muslim world centuries earlier," but does not indicate what doctrinal innovation is involved.⁵ This article will attempt to do so.

The portion of the Babi community which followed Baha'u'llah and later his son and designated successor `Abdu'l-Baha is known as the Baha'i Faith. It is usually considered as an independent religion, rather than a branch of Islam.

³ For a treatment of the interactions between Baha'u'llah and political reformer movements such as the initiators of the Tanzimat reforms, the Young Ottomans, and the precursors of the Iranian constitutional movement, see J. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: the Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998, and the article cited in note 5.

⁴ Cole, J.R.I., Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century, *Int. J. Middle East Stud.* **24** (1992), p. 5.

⁵ Bayat, M. *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious thought in Qajar Iran*, Syracuse University Press, 1982, p. 130.

CHURCH AND STATE IN THE BAHAI SCRIPTURES

Baha'u'llah was a prolific writer,⁶ and the amount of material which is relevant to his political views is daunting. An overview is simplified by distinguishing between references to the church-state relationship *per se* and those that address the forms of government (democracy, constitutional monarchy) and the ethics of its operations (justice, an option for the poor, freedom of speech and religion, peace, disarmament and international government). The former is the theology of the state, the topic of this paper, while the latter is political theory and has already been addressed by Cole.

The Kitab-i Iqan

The first important Baha'i scriptural text on the church-state question is Baha'u'llah's *Kitab-i Iqan* (Book of Certitude),⁷ a treatise composed in late 1860 or early 1861 at a time when the Babi community was scattered, oppressed and demoralised: their Messiah (the Bab) had come but the millennium had not arrived. The doctrine of the two sovereignties in the *Kitab-i Iqan* is the decisive step in the transmutation of a theocratic sectarianism shaped by Shi'ih expectations into a new religion defined by Baha'u'llah's own ideas and person. Baha'u'llah had already laid the basis for his own messianic claim within the Babi community, and would shortly make that claim explicit and then public. He had to demonstrate that the Bab did indeed display the

⁶ Since there are very many works, mainly short, they have been published mainly in compilations, and the more important works such as those cited in this paper are likely to have been published in the original and in translation in many composite books. Moreover many compilations in the original and in translation contain only parts of works. Rather than provide complete details for each of the works cited here, the reader is referred to the Leiden List of the Tablets of Baha'u'llah, which gives the places of publication for each work, including its Persian and Arabic sources. A 1997 version of the list is printed in Stockman and Winters, *A Resource Guide for the Scholarly Study of the Baha'i Faith*, Wilmette, Research Office of the Baha'i National Center, and a more recent version may be downloaded from <http://bahai-library.org/resources/leiden.list/>. Complete texts of English translations are available at the same site.

⁷ Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i Iqan: the Book of Certitude*, translated by Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette Baha'i Publishing Trust, pocket edition 1989.

sovereignty expected of the Qa'im, and then to provide a justification for the separate sovereignty of the state after the eschaton.

Baha'u'llah does this first by proposing figurative rather than literal readings of the signs of the Qa'im. He uses examples drawn from Islam and the 'Little Apocalypse' of Matthew 24 to show that a literal reading of eschatological signs is nonsensical, that such literal readings have been the cause of the denial of Jesus and Muhammad in their times, and that symbolic readings are necessary to avoid the risk of again denying the Promised One. Baha'u'llah then refers rather briefly to an Islamic version of neoplatonic cosmology, according to which the names and attributes of God are manifest in all creation, and to the greatest perfection in the Manifestations of God. From this he concludes that the Bab, if he was a Manifestation of God, must indeed have evinced sovereignty "though to outward seeming ... shorn of all earthly majesty" (p. 104).

With this argument Baha'u'llah generalises the question, from the sovereignty of the Qa'im to that of prophets in general, and precludes a delayed eschatology in which the Bab would be a preliminary figure who did not represent the eschatological promise in its fullness. The Bab had prophesied the coming of a figure known as 'He whom God will make manifest', and it would have been natural to transfer unfulfilled apocalyptic expectations to this figure. The Babis might then have expected Baha'u'llah to fulfil the messianic scenario literally, conquering the world and overturning its order, massacring the deniers, defeating unjust rulers and exercising earthly majesty. Moreover the Ottoman Sultan and government would have good reason to fear the same, and the new prophet, like the Bab before him, might have been crushed between the apocalyptic fervour of an expectant community and a state fighting for survival.

In part two of the *Kitab-i Iqan*, Baha'u'llah explains the nature of the sovereignty of the Qa'im:

... by sovereignty is meant the all-encompassing, all-pervading power which is inherently exercised by the Qa'im whether or not He appear to the world clothed in the majesty of earthly dominion. ... That sovereignty is the spiritual ascendancy ... which in due time revealeth itself to the world ... (pp. 107--8)

He gives the example of Muhammad's lack of worldly power during the time he was in Mecca, and contrasts it with the spiritual authority which was accorded to Muhammad in Baha'u'llah's own time. The sovereignty of the prophets resides in the power to attract devotion and to change hearts, to reform morals, call forth sacrifices, and to create a new form of human community. While it is clearly differentiated from worldly dominion, and superior in as much as it is long-lasting, Baha'u'llah does not say that it over-rules or displaces temporal government:

Were sovereignty to mean earthly sovereignty and worldly dominion, were it to imply the subjection and external allegiance of all the peoples and kindreds of the earth - whereby His loved ones should be exalted and be made to live in peace, and His enemies be abased and tormented - such [a] form of sovereignty would not be true of God Himself, the Source of all dominion, Whose majesty and power all things testify. ... (p. 125)

Baha'u'llah is saying that the ways of God do not change: if God does not force belief or obedience on humanity, then the Qa'im cannot. But he is also saying that the distinction between earthly and spiritual sovereignty is proper to God's self: that the Kingdom of God created by the Qa'im must be 'true of God Himself', it must reflect the nature of dominion, majesty and power in the Kingdom in Heaven. I will return to this point in 'A speculative theology'.

The Letters to the Kings

From 1863 to 1892 Baha'u'llah was in internal exile, first in Edirne and then in `Akka and the surrounding area. In 1866 there was a decisive split in the Babi community, with one group acknowledging Baha'u'llah and another following his half-brother Mirza Yahya, Subh-i Azal. The latter group, known as Azalis, included many of those opposed to the state and particularly the Qajar dynasty of Iran, which they blamed for the execution of the Bab. The political ambitions and militancy of the Azali faction seems to have been one of the roots of the conflict.⁸ Azal had attempted to mount a military insurrection in Mazandaran in 1852 and had encouraged

⁸ Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 365, 414; Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions* p. 60.

militancy and attempts to assassinate the Shah later in the same decade.⁹ Azalis continued to support and participate in opposition to Qajar rule until the constitutional revolution of 1905.¹⁰ The split consolidated Baha'u'llah's position as leader of the Bahai community, while the public distinction between Bahai identity and the Azalis meant that he could deny any relationship to revolutionary or theocratic ideas still being put forward in those groups. Following the split, from late 1867, Baha'u'llah began to write letters to kings and rulers, followed by systematic explanations of his own teachings intended for external audiences and publication. His contacts and correspondence with the Tanzimat and later with Young Ottoman and Iranian reformers also date from this period, and continued until his death.

The *Súriy-i Mulúk* brings together several of these letters to kings and rulers. It is central to understanding Baha'u'llah's theology of the state. In the opening section, addressed to the Kings collectively, Baha'u'llah commands them to "Fling away ... the things ye possess, and take fast hold on the Handle of God."¹¹ However this submission to the will of God, implying acceptance of the new revelation of Baha'u'llah, clearly does not require that the kings should abdicate, since Baha'u'llah goes on to command them to rule justly, to care for the poor, to form international agreements and moderate their armaments, expenditure and taxation. Baha'u'llah's acknowledgement of the legitimacy of their rule is unequivocal, but he uses it to set for them a high standard of behaviour:

God hath committed into your hands the reins of the government of the people, that ye may rule with justice over them, safeguard the rights of the down-trodden, and punish the wrong-doers. If ye neglect the duty prescribed unto you by God in His Book, your names shall be numbered with those of the unjust in His sight.¹²

⁹ Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 98--99.

¹¹ Translated in Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, Wilmette, Illinois, Baha'i Publishing Trust, Revised edition 1980, p. 20.

¹² Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, translated by Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1939, 1976 (Second revised edition). Section CXVI, p. 247.

It is significant that the rulers are said here to rule on behalf of God, rather than as deputies of the Qa'im. Since Baha'u'llah himself claimed to be that Qa'im, the latter position (which would be expected in the light of the Shi'ih background) would have been an implicit claim to suzerainty. While the rulers are exhorted to observe 'the duty prescribed' in the Book, these are ethical duties relating to good government. There is no indication that Baha'u'llah intended by this that the rulers should enforce the shari`ah on their subjects. The 'law' referred to is simpler and older:

Lay not on any soul a load which ye would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for any one the things ye would not desire for yourselves.¹³

Another aspect of Baha'u'llah's model of human society appears in the same passage, where he continues:

Respect ye the divines and learned (*`ulama*) amongst you, they whose conduct accords with their professions ... Know ye that they are the lamps of guidance unto them that are in the heavens and on the earth. They who disregard and neglect the divines and learned that live amongst them -- these have truly changed the favor with which God hath favored them.¹⁴

The importance of those who are learned in the religious sciences, as advisors to the government, will emerge again in `Abdu'l-Baha's writings. For now it should be noted that their position in this passage is not less than that which the `ulama were accorded in Sunni political theory. While Baha'u'llah is clear in his denunciations of the mass of the `ulama of his day, this

¹³ Tablet to the Kings, translated in *Gleanings*, LXVI, p. 128.

¹⁴ loc. cit.

does not arise from an anti-clerical, let alone secular, social theory. Like the kings, the `ulama are condemned for failing to live up to their sacred responsibilities.

Baha'u'llah urges Sultan `Abdu'l-`Aziz, who ruled through a cabinet government with appointed ministers, to select only ministers who are righteous and fear God. This points towards two themes which are more fully developed elsewhere: the role of religion in providing the moral standards necessary to government and the duty of the righteous to be involved in the art of politics, in the broadest sense.¹⁵

While Baha'u'llah as prophet upbraids the rulers for their injustice and reminds them that mortal sovereignty is fleeting, he also says that as a citizen he has always been obedient to government and will remain so. But his good wishes have a barb of criticism in their tail:

Have I, O King, ever disobeyed thee? ... Not for one short moment did We rebel against thee, or against any of thy ministers. Never, God willing, shall We revolt against thee ... In the day time and in the night season ... We pray to God on thy behalf, *that He may graciously aid thee to be obedient unto Him* and to observe His commandment ...¹⁶

Ye perpetrate every day a fresh injustice, and treat Me as ye treated Me in times past, though I never attempted to meddle with your affairs. At no time have I opposed you, neither have I rebelled against your laws.¹⁷

In one passage Baha'u'llah sets out what appears to be a charter for civil disobedience, declaring “If the laws and regulations to which ye cleave be of your own making, We will, in no wise, follow them”.¹⁸ However it is not clear whether he is refusing to obey Ottoman law, or the arbitrary decisions of the Ottoman ministers who are addressed in this passage. Even if it is the former, the intention does not seem to be to deny the validity of civil law per se, or to claim a

¹⁵ See note 2.

¹⁶ Letter to Sultan `Abdu'l-`Aziz, *Gleanings*, CXIV, p. 240.

¹⁷ Letter to Persian Ambassador Haji Mirza Husayn Khan, *Gleanings*, CXIII, p. 224.

¹⁸ *Suriy-i Muluk*, in *Gleanings* LXV, p. 123.

status beyond the law for himself as a prophet. Rather he asks that the law and regulations be based not on fiat but on reason, and applied consistently and not at the whim of the administrator: “bring forth, then, your proofs ... If your rules and principles be founded on justice, why is it, then, that ye follow those which accord with your corrupt inclinations and reject such as conflict with your desires?”.¹⁹ The appeal to reason to legitimate political acts is another important theme in Baha’u’llah’s political thought. It is related to his belief that in this messianic age, ‘reason’ has been poured out on all peoples so that the masses have the political maturity to govern themselves.

At the same time as he addressed the kings, Baha’u’llah was also preaching the recognition of the rights of the state to the Babi and Bahai communities. He writes to one of his own followers:

The one true God ... hath ever regarded, and will continue to regard, the hearts of men as His own, His exclusive possession. All else, whether pertaining to land or sea, whether riches or glory, He hath bequeathed unto the Kings and rulers of the earth. ... The instruments which are essential to the immediate protection, the security and assurance of the human race have been entrusted to the hands, and lie in the grasp, of the governors of human society. This is the wish of God and His decree....²⁰

Such a forthright legitimation of the state is not unique, but is certainly interesting, in light of recent Iranian history, to find it coming from an Iranian Shi`ih background. Moreover it does not describe an interim acceptance of temporal powers pending the eschaton: it comes from one claiming to be the Promised One, speaking to a community for which the end times are now.

Later writings

¹⁹ *ibid*, pp. 123--24.

²⁰ The Lawh-i Ashraf, in *Gleanings*, CII, pp. 206--7.

The *Kitab-i Aqdas*, Baha'u'llah's 'Most Great Book',²¹ belongs to the early 'Akka period (1868--1873) but the earliest material for it is contemporary with the letters to rulers discussed above. It repeats many of the same themes, but the fact that they are in this work is itself significant for Bahai theology. In the *Kitab-i Aqdas* Baha'u'llah establishes the Bahai community as a community living under laws, and lays the foundations of its principal institutions. The book can be considered as the central document of the constitutional law of a Bahai society. No Bahai institution is given authority to alter any of its laws or principles.

In the *Aqdas*, Baha'u'llah recognises and honours the institution of human government, in the forms of monarchy, democracy and republican government, and enjoins all people to obey "those who wield authority". Given the importance attached to this book, no alteration to these principles is conceivable. Those who have suggested that the Bahai recognition of the rights of temporal government and the duty of obedience to it is no more than the tactical response of a powerless community have not taken this into account.²²

Baha'u'llah announces himself to the kings, in the *Aqdas*, in tones of prophetic denunciation, using messianic political titles ('the desire of the nations' and 'the King of kings'), so that the reader has no doubt that this is the Qa'im speaking. But he combines this with a forthright renunciation of any claim to earthly sovereignty:

He Who is the sovereign Lord of all is come ... from the heart of Zion there cometh the cry: "The promise is fulfilled" ... Ye are but vassals, O kings of the earth! He Who is the King of Kings hath appeared, ... Arise, and serve Him Who is the Desire of all nations, Who hath created you through a word from Him, and ordained you to be, for all time, the emblems of His sovereignty. ... By the righteousness of God! *It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men.* ... To this testifieth the Kingdom of Names, could ye but comprehend it. ... Forsake

²¹ *The Kitab-i Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*, Haifa, Baha'i World Centre, 1992.

²² See for example Ficicchia, F., *Der Baha'ismus, Weltreligion der Zukunft?*, Stuttgart, Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, 1981, p. 399.

your palaces, and haste ye to gain admittance into His Kingdom. This, indeed, will profit you both in this world and in the next.²³

The reference to the Kingdom of Names in the emphasised passage may appear obscure. It refers to a metaphysical realm analogous to the neoplatonic world of ideas, in which the ‘ideas’ are the names and attributes of God.²⁴ Why Baha’u’llah refers to this concept to justify the separation of religious and temporal spheres should become clear from the discussion of organic unity and the emanation of the names of God below. For now it should be noted that Baha’u’llah refers to the kings as the emblems of God’s sovereignty, “for all time’. It follows that the phrase “forsake your palaces” does not mean ‘give up your thrones’. Moreover the following paragraph praises “the king who will arise to aid My Cause in My kingdom”, which clearly envisions kings exercising power into the future. All people are commanded to aid such a king “to unlock the cities with the keys of My Name,” that is, to use words and persuasion to extend the influence of Baha’u’llah’s teachings. The implication (made explicit elsewhere) is that force and pressure are not to be used.

While the texts discussed have been addressed to the monarchs of the day, the Aqdas also contains a similar passage addressed to republican governments in America, and another predicting that Teheran will have both a monarchy and a democratic government. Without entering into a discussion of Baha’u’llah’s ideas about forms of government, it is important to note that while he frequently addresses monarchs in the Aqdas, his theology and ethic of government apply to governments of whatever form.

Another text from the same period as the Aqdas, Baha’u’llah’s letter to Pope Pius IX (1869), gives an indication of the church-state relationship he favoured. Baha’u’llah advises the Pope to “Abandon thy kingdom unto the kings, ... Exhort the kings and say: ‘Deal equitably

²³ *Kitab-i Aqdas*, extracts from paragraphs 78 to 83.

²⁴ See note 34.

with men. Beware lest ye transgress the bounds fixed in the Book.”²⁵ From this it is clear that religious institutions are not intended to withdraw to an apolitical cloister, but to work in the body politic within the ethical sphere, with full respect for civil government, and without laying claim to the authority which God has delegated to the ‘kings’.

In his *Lawh-i Dunya*, Baha’u’llah proposes a specific role for the Iranian clergy and senior government officers in a body which appears to be a constitutional convention to frame reforms for Iran (although it might also be a permanent legislature).²⁶ The argument for a consultative role for the clergy is repeated at more length in his *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*,²⁷ citing Mark 12:17 (“Render unto Caesar”) and Qur’an 4:62. This is remarkable if it is remembered that he and his community had suffered much from the Shi’ih clergy of Iran, and stood to gain nothing from their involvement in the constitutional reforms. He continues in the *Lawh-i Dunya* to apply the same model of separated but cooperating church and state institutions to the Baha’i institutions:

According to the fundamental laws which We have formerly revealed in the *Kitab-i Aqdas* and other Tablets, all affairs are committed to the care of just kings and presidents and of the Trustees of the House of Justice.²⁸

Given the reference to the *Kitab-i Aqdas*, the ‘House of Justice’ here must refer to the elected Bahai institution which is authorised in that work to administer the affairs of each local Bahai community.²⁹ The Bahai Houses of Justice are not clergy, nor are they necessarily ‘ulama (learned in religious sciences), their function is administrative. Nevertheless they are to fill the

²⁵ Extract translated in Shoghi Effendi, *Proclamation of Bahá’u’lláh*, Wilmette, Illinois, 1978, p. 85.

²⁶ *Tablets of Baha’u’llah, revealed after the Kitab-i Aqdas*, translated by Habib Taherzadeh, Haifa, Baha’i World Centre, 1978., 92--93.

²⁷ Translated by Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, Illinois, Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1941, revised edition 1979, pp. 89--92, 137.

²⁸ *Tablets of Baha’u’llah*, p. 93.

²⁹ *Kitab-i Aqdas*, paragraph 30. ‘House of Justice’ (in Persian) was also a term used in Iranian constitutionalist literature to refer to a parliament. The usage in the Baha’i writings is occasionally ambiguous, but not in this case.

same role in relation to the state that he advocated for the clergy in Iran. He continues immediately:

The system of government which the British people have adopted in London appeareth to be good, for it is adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people.

In formulating the principles and laws a part hath been devoted to penalties which form an effective instrument for the security and protection of men. However, dread of the penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God.

In the light of the consultative role of religion in government which was mentioned in the previous paragraphs, it is reasonable to suppose that it is not only English constitutional monarchy which Baha'u'llah admires, but also the constitutional position of the church in England. The Church of England is within the state, broadly defined, but is not in the government. It is in a position to be consulted and to criticise but not to rule or to coerce belief. This constitutional settlement -- of separated but co-operating religious and state orders -- is referred to again by Baha'u'llah in the *Lawh-i Maqsd*:

Our hope is that the world's religious leaders and the rulers thereof will unitedly arise for the reformation of this age ... Let them ... take counsel together and, through anxious and full deliberation, administer to a diseased and sorely-afflicted world the remedy it requireth.³⁰

If Baha'u'llah favours the same sort of constitutional settlement in such diverse cases -- and even where the 'church' concerned is a hostile Shi'ih establishment -- it cannot be merely a response to the practical political possibilities in particular nations. The passage from the *Lawh-i Dunya* cited above points to one consideration valid for all societies: no state based entirely on coercion can be a good state, but the state itself lacks the instruments to elicit altruism. Good

³⁰ *Gleanings*, CX, pp. 215--6.

governance therefore depends on social organs, including religious organisations, which foster altruism and ethical behaviour in society. The work of these organisations in turn cannot be effective unless they are seen to be in a position to call governing institutions to observe the same high ethical standards.

This interdependent relationship implies that the state should support religion in general, but it will be noted that Baha'u'llah does not suggest that it support any particular confession, including his own:

It behoveth the chiefs and rulers of the world, and in particular the Trustees of God's House of Justice, to endeavour to the utmost of their power to safeguard its [religion's] position, promote its interests and exalt its station in the eyes of the world.³¹

Whether this involves state financial support for religious institutions is not clear from Baha'u'llah's writings, but a position can be deduced from the fact that only believers may contribute financially to the central institution of the Bahai community, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar or House of Worship, whereas money from diverse sources including taxes may be used for the institutions for educational, medical and charitable purposes which function as dependencies of the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar.

A note of caution is in place here. It is clear that Baha'u'llah believed that the involvement of religious institutions and religious experts in civil society and as advisors to government was essential to good governance and the health of the society itself. He urges governments to support religion. This looks like establishment, a term that is in fact used by Shoghi Effendi (see below) to refer to the position of the Bahai Faith in a Bahai state at some future date.³² But this is not a claim based on the truth or superiority of one confession: Baha'u'llah writes of the social function of religion in general, and in the concrete case of

³¹ Lawh-i Ishrāqī, in *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh*, p. 130, see also pp. 63-64.

³² Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 14.

contemporary Iran argued that the Shi`ih clergy should be enlisted in an advisory capacity with the Shah and political leaders to devise a joint approach to Iran's problems. His position here is similar to that of S.T. Coleridge: every state should have an established religion, whatever that may be. In a pluralist society, establishment need not be exclusive: the United Kingdom, for instance could invite confessions other than the Church of England to provide members to sit alongside the Bishops in the House of Lords, not because they represent a certain portion of the population (the Lords is not meant to be a representative institution) but because their religious traditions represent a source of wisdom that can contribute to the process of government. Baha'u'llah's son `Abdu'l-Baha (see below) even said that Baha'u'llah had advocated the formation of an inter-religious consultative body comprising representatives of world religious systems.³³ The point to be emphasised here is that establishment and freedom of conscience are in principle separate issues. The state may make constitutional arrangements such that it systematically draws on the wisdom and ethical motivation of religion without preferring one confession, adopting its doctrines or disadvantaging those of other confessions or of none.

Baha'u'llah's denial of any claim to temporal government, in the *Kitab-i Iqan*, the letters to the Kings, and the *Kitab-i Aqdas*, is repeated in his later writings, often in similar words which it would be repetitious to cite here.³⁴ Yet many writers, including both anti-Bahai polemicists and the Bahai secondary literature, have claimed that the Bahais ultimately aim to establish a world theocratic government in which their own administrative institutions would replace national governments and provide an international government. This is the reverse of what Baha'u'llah taught. An extensive review of this secondary literature, as part of the research for this paper, has not disclosed any single reason for the almost universal misrepresentation of Baha'u'llah's views.³⁵ However one factor has been that the concept of a messianic movement

³³ I see the notes of a speech delivered by `Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 233. I have not been able to confirm this in Baha'u'llah's writings.

³⁴ See, for example, a letter to Nabī-i A`zam, in *Gleanings*, CXXXIX, p. 304; *Lawh-i Dhabih*, in *Gleanings*, CXV, pages 241-2; *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pages 89-92 and 137; *Kitāb-i `Ahd*, in *Tablets of Bahā'u'llāh*, pp. 220-221.

³⁵ A separate paper on the topic is in preparation.

which supported the indefinite continuation of the state in the Kingdom of God was too far outside the known dynamics of religion to be entirely believed either within the Bahai community or outside it. Cole, in 'Iranian Millenarianism' (pp. 5 and 10) cites the views of Baha'u'llah's contemporaries 'Ali Pasha the Ottoman foreign minister and Ebüzziya Tevfik, a Young Ottoman reformer. The former apparently believed that Baha'u'llah refused to recognise the separation of religious and temporal authority, while the latter thought that the Bahais were obedient to the Ottoman government but were aiming at a revolution in Iran. There seems to be almost a plaintive tone as Baha'u'llah writes again, probably towards the end of his life:

Most imagine that this Servant hath the intention of establishing a full-blown government on earth -- even though, in all the tablets, He hath forbidden the servants to accept such a rank. ... Kings are the manifestations of divine power, and our intent is only that they should be just. If they keep their gaze upon justice, they are reckoned as of God.³⁶

In summary, the separation of church and state, as distinct but interdependent organs within the body politic, is one of the key themes running through Baha'u'llah's life work. He takes a single position, from his first major doctrinal work, the *Kitab-i Iqan* to his Will and Testament, the *Kitab-i 'Ahd*.³⁷ He writes and speaks of it often and in the clearest terms, but was not believed in his own time and has, with few exceptions, been misrepresented since.

The writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi

Baha'u'llah appointed his eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), to lead the community, resolve disputes and as the interpreter of his teachings. The latter appointed his grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957) as 'Guardian', intending that a line of hereditary guardians should function

³⁶ Undated passage translated in Cole, *Modernity*, p. 35. A similar denial of any claim to world domination is found in the Tablet to Nasiri'd-Din Shah (*The Baha'i World* (Yearbook), Vol. 4: 1930--1932, p. 103.

³⁷ *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 220-221. The relevant passage is included by 'Abdu'l-Baha in his 'Treatise on Leadership' and is cited below.

alongside the elected Houses of Justice, the one dealing with doctrine and the other with law and administration.

`Abdu'l-Baha's writings are voluminous, including large numbers of letters regarding constitutional developments in Iran and notes from speeches explaining the Bahai teachings. Of these only his *Risalih-yi Siyasiyyah* (1893)³⁸ will be mentioned here. The work was probably written during the Iranian Tobacco Revolt of 1890-92. It draws extensively on Iranian and Ottoman political history to demonstrate that the separation of church and state and freedom of conscience are prerequisites for good government, while the interference of religion in government has always brought disaster.

`Abdu'l-Baha relates the separation of church and state to two fundamental forces or metaphysical principles (*govveh*, translated by Cole as 'faculties'), the one the principle of governance "which bestows external happiness on the human realm ... safeguards human life, property and honour," the second "represented by the spiritual, holy authority, heavenly, revealed books, divine prophets, celestial souls, and the learned in the All-Merciful." Religious leaders, including 'divine prophets', do not enter the political sphere because:

... the affairs of leadership and government, of kingdom and subjects, already have a respected object of authority, an appointed source, whereas a different holy centre and distinct wellspring exists with regard to guidance, religion, knowledge, education, and the promulgation of good morals and of the virtues of true humanity. These latter souls have nothing to do with affairs of civil leadership, nor do they seek to interfere in them. Thus, in this most great cycle of the maturity and adulthood of the world ... is it written [by Baha'u'llah] in the Book of the Covenant ... whose decree is decisive ...

"O ye the loved ones and the trustees of God! Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth, and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain. Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. This is a decree of God in this Most Great Revelation. It is divinely preserved from annulment ..."³⁹

³⁸ `Abdu'l-Baha, *Risalih-yi Siyasiyyah* (Treatise on Leadership, La Politique), Persian text with English and French translations by Juan Cole and Hippolyte Dreyfus respectively at <http://h-net.msu.edu/~bahai>.

³⁹ Here Cole cites the published translation of the Kitab-i `Ahd in Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 220-221.

Religious leaders, he says, can only advise:

These souls are the authorities in establishing the purport of divine laws, not with regard to their implementation. That is, whenever the government questions them about the exigencies of the revealed law and the reality of the divine ordinances ... they must communicate the conclusions to which their jurisprudential reasoning has led them about the commands of God ... Otherwise, what expertise do they have in political matters ...?

While religious leaders and institutions are restrained from usurping the leadership proper to political institutions, individual believers are required to support the state and therefore to participate in the political process, within legitimate channels. Since the autocratic governments of Baha'u'llah's day hardly allowed room for legal political activity, this point does not emerge adequately in the passages cited above. It is however implicit in Baha'u'llah's letter to Sultan `Abdu'l Aziz, mentioned above, for if the ruler is urged to appoint officials whose fear of God will ensure their trustworthiness, it follows that genuine support for governments entails a duty for the faithful to serve in public capacities. When `Abdu'l-Baha was in Paris in 1911 he spoke on this topic, emphasising the importance of involving men and women of religion in the affairs of government, and praising the trustworthiness of Bahais serving in the Persian government. `Abdu'l-Baha appears to be criticising the French constitutional settlement of the early years of the twentieth century, in which practising Roman Catholics were excluded from cabinet and senior posts in key ministries.⁴⁰

The implications for citizens in democratic countries were explicated by `Abdu'l-Baha:

⁴⁰ See note 2 for the sources and commentary. The reference to Baha'is in the Persian government appears only in the Persian version. Hippolyte Dreyfus, in his *Essai sur le Baha'isme* (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, third edition, 1962), begins his chapter on the Baha'i Faith and the State by saying that "The separation of church and state can only be temporary -- a momentary stage in the march of societies." His words were translated in a widely-used book and became one of the factors behind the almost universal misrepresentation of Baha'u'llah's teachings in the later Baha'i and anti-Baha'i literature. Perhaps Dreyfus had simply misunderstood, but this is unlikely, given his excellent translation of the *Risalih-yi Siyasiyyah*. It seems probable that he meant that separation as it was then achieved in France, by barring believers from senior government posts, was not in accordance with Baha'i teachings.

Thou hast asked regarding the political affairs. ... as the government of America is a republican form of government, it is necessary that all the citizens shall take part in the elections of officers and take part in the affairs of the republic.⁴¹

Confusion between the principle that religious leaders and institutions should not interfere in politics, on the one hand, and the duty of each believer to participate as a citizen of both heavenly and temporal cities, on the other hand, has contributed to the poor treatment of the church-state question in the secondary literature.

Shoghi Effendi's own writings contain little that illuminates the church-state question. He systematised and clarified what his predecessors had said about the need for institutions of world governance, but his descriptions of those institutions do not mention any religious bodies. He also expanded on what they had said regarding the Houses of Justice and other Bahai religious institutions, and developed them in practice. But beyond stating definitely that the Bahais must never "allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries,"⁴² and vigorously emphasising the duty of obedience of government, says nothing on the church-state issue.⁴³

THEMES FOR A POLITICAL THEOLOGY

From the sources cited above, and drawing on `Abdu'l-Baha's explanations of Bahai teachings, the following themes for a Bahai political theology emerge:

- The Day of God has come and the Kingdom of God is being built, but is embodied in two distinct sovereignties.

⁴¹ *Tablets of `Abdu'l-Baha Abbas*, pp. 342--43. While voting is, in principle, part of the appropriate response to such governments and the sovereignty which they embody, on a more practical level other principles, such as the Baha'i abhorrence for partisan methods, mean that many Baha'is are politically inactive.

⁴² *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 66.

⁴³ Silence does not necessarily indicate lack of interest. Most of the passages from the works of Baha'u'llah cited in this paper were selected, translated and published by Shoghi Effendi (who favored an English style reminiscent of the King James Version).

- God has delegated one of these sovereignties to human governments, which are therefore expected to manifest the qualities of God, particularly by dealing justly, protecting the weak and punishing wrong-doers.
- Religious and state institutions are distinct organs in the body politic. Religious institutions should not be involved in civil administration or policy matters. The separation of church and state is a sign of human maturity and is irrevocable.
- Religion should be 'established': should have a constitutional role and at least moral support, without necessarily implying the exclusive establishment of any one confession. Governments may not interfere with freedom of conscience. Religious institutions have a role in sustaining altruism and deserve support from the state for that reason. Religious institutions have a duty to call the state to meet ethical standards, and to advise it on the implications of religious teachings if asked.
- Governments should be consultative, constrained by law and based on reason. Monarchy should be preserved, but in a constitutional form.
- Governments are responsible for providing security. They should combine to reduce armaments and ensure international security.
- Faithful citizens are required, as a religious duty, to support their governments and to participate in legitimate ways in political processes.
- Governments and people should respect learning and the learned, who function as advisors and admonishers to government. They in turn are obliged to practice what they preach.

What is now required is a theo-logical foundation for these, to go from political theology to a theology of the body politic. Practical political reasoning may be sufficient to persuade states that religious organisations functioning within civil society are generally helpful, but religious communities must have a reasoning based on the nature of God's self if the relationship is to go beyond tactical co-operation.

A SPECULATIVE THEOLOGY

Organic unity

As noted above, Western religious traditions have not integrated their theologies of the state and their ecclesiologies. In the Bahai case the relationship between the body of the faithful and the body politic is explicit: the pattern underlying the Bahai Faith as a religious organisation ('The Bahai administrative order') is also the pattern for the Kingdom on earth (the 'World Order'):

The second [Baha'i] century is destined to witness ... the first stirrings of that World Order, of which the present Administrative System is at once the precursor, the nucleus and pattern -- an Order which, as it slowly crystallises and radiates its benign influence over the entire planet, will proclaim at once the coming of age of the whole human race, as well as the maturity of the Faith itself, the progenitor of that Order.⁴⁴

The pattern of institutional relations that characterises the Bahai administrative order can be summarised in one word: 'twoness'. At the global level its two principle institutions are the Guardianship and the House of Justice, the first hereditary and devoted to the interpretation of the scriptures, the second elected and charged with the application of the Bahai teachings. These head the two 'arms' of the administrative order. The elected arm is a bottom-up pyramid, with directly elected local Houses of Justice (known as Local Spiritual Assemblies) and indirectly elected National Spiritual Assemblies, whose members comprise the electoral college which chooses the Universal House of Justice. The appointed arm, in contrast, is a spreading tree: its first officers were appointed by the Guardian as his assistants, and they in turn have assistants and sub-assistants, to the level of representatives in local communities. The whole is funded through two distinct kinds of financial institutions, 'funds' based on voluntary donations at the local level, with local communities passing whatever portion they choose upwards to national

⁴⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to America, 1932--1946*, Wilmette, Illinois, Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1947, pages 96-97.

and international levels of both the elected and appointed arms, and a religious tax (Huqúqu'llah) which is paid directly to the Universal House of Justice and disbursed downward to both elected and appointed arms and to other institutions and purposes, such as charity and development aid. Moreover the Bahai administrative order as a whole functions in partnership with another institution, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar or 'House of Worship'. The term is multivalent, like 'church': it may be literally a building, but also refers to meetings for worship and a community bound together by joint worship. If the administrative order represents the organisation of the religion, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar represents religion as worship. The one functions with defined memberships and often closed meetings, the other holds its doors open to people of all creeds and none. The one has fixed procedures: memberships, elections, quorums, officers, because it exercises authority and it must be possible to distinguish legitimate from illegitimate decisions. The Mashriqu'l-Adhkar however avoids anything which might give the appearance of rigidity, it is a channel for the Holy Spirit.

Brief as this outline of Bahai community structures is -- and Bahai readers will be horrified at how much is omitted or simplified -- it shows that the 'pattern' of institutional relations in the community's self-conception is anything but monist. Not only are there diverse institutions, but they function in different and sometimes contrasting ways, according to the different purposes that they serve in the whole. The pattern could be characterised as 'organic' unity, by which I mean a unity based on the co-operation of distinct organs, each with its own nature and proper sphere, each developing freely according to its essential nature. The co-ordination of organs within an organic structure is the necessary result of the harmony between their various natures: it is not imposed by one organ upon the others. The differences between the organs, their specialisation by nature and function, create their need for one another and thus the possibility of unity. Differences, it must be stressed, are not antagonistic to unity. Difference is not to be transcended, ignored, subsumed or otherwise kept within bounds: in an organic

social model the essential differences are constitutive of the unity. Baha'u'llah explicitly applies the organic metaphor to the whole:

Regard ye the world as a man's body, which is afflicted with divers ailments, and the recovery of which dependeth upon the harmonising of all of its component elements.⁴⁵

Might the same model of unity also apply, in a post-modern society, to the relations between the religious, political, commercial, scientific, and cultural enterprises, and the world of nature?

A small diversion is in order here, because the Bahai Faith has become known for its slogan 'unity in diversity', applied for instance to race relations. Unity in diversity is a unity based on underlying sameness, enriched by superficial difference. There is no difference in essence (in the neoplatonic sense) between black and white, male and female, Jew and Christian. But there are differences of essence between legitimated social institutions, for instance between the House of Justice and House of Worship, between Church and State, between Faith and Science. Organic unity and unity-in-diversity together comprise the *kerygma*, the essential teaching of the Bahai Faith. But it is the former which interests us here, as the pattern underlying the Bahai community's ecclesiology and Baha'u'llah's teaching on church-state relationships.

Organic unity is harmony with an Other, it is a unity of mutual respect and not of subsumption or command. Love presupposes an other, and this gives us the first reason for supposing that the separation of church and state is grounded in the will of God and is proper to the Kingdom of God: that they may love one another. A monist social model -- whether it be of an absolutist state or a theocratic church -- permits no other and is therefore loveless. So the separation of church and state reflects the divine twoness of things:

"Glory be to Him, who created all the pairs, of such things as earth produces, and out of men themselves, and of things beyond their ken." (Qur'an 36:36)

⁴⁵ Letter to Napoleon III, in *Proclamation of Baha'u'llah*, p. 22.

“He has let loose the two seas, that they meet each other: Between them is a barrier which they cannot pass. ... From each He bringeth up greater and lesser pearls ... (Qur’an 55: 19-22)

Unicity is proper to God alone, in a Godhead which we may contemplate but not understand. Twoness, and the endless permutations of ‘the many’, are proper to creation. Attempts to create monist social structures are therefore implicitly idolatrous.

Applying the model of organic unity, and the divine decree of multiplicity, to social structures implies breaking the monopoly of religious institutions on the sacred. Within the Bahai community’s model of itself, no one institution can claim to be the channel of the spirit. Each of the organs has its own legitimisation directly from scripture. And the ecclesiological microcosm is reflected in the macrocosm: the art of government, the creative arts, and science do not have to shelter under the religious umbrella to be graced: each has already been granted the dignity of a divine institution, directly from the source. As ‘Abdu’l-Baha says:

Glory be unto Him who hath produced growth in the adjoining fields of various natures! Glory be unto Him who irrigated them with the same waters gushing forth from that Fountain! ⁴⁶

This is already sufficient to show that the social structure of the Kingdom of God is not incompatible with that of a decentralised post-modern society. We now have a theological justification of ‘the separation’, but have not yet justified ‘of church and state’. Do words such as government, science and religion represent arbitrary distinctions? If we grant that distinct and autonomous social organs are a prerequisite to love and thus to the Kingdom of God, is there a necessary reason why one of these organs should be civil government? This is what must be demonstrated before we can speak of ‘a theology of the state’.

⁴⁶ *Tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Baha Abbas*, Chicago, Baha’i Publishing Society (3 volumes, 1909--1919), p. 398.

Three lines of reasoning present themselves. The first is an argument from history, which gives us some reason to think that a distinct organ of government may be essential for the health of any society. It may even be unavoidable. Those societies in which the religious institutions have tried to absorb the whole of the legislative, executive, and judicial functions have not been successful, and all have developed *de jure* or *de facto* institutions of civil government.

We see also that the development from primitive social organisations at the level of the kinship group through successive levels of urbanisation and nation-building has been accompanied by a progressive differentiation of social functions: the priest, the warrior, the king, the blacksmith, and the herbalist leading to the differentiated interdependent structures of a nation. In the development of a foetus in the womb, we see the progressive differentiation of distinct organs from what is originally an undifferentiated cluster of cells. The organism is mature when the component organs are fully differentiated, have developed their own internal structures according to the genetic code for each, and all are functioning correctly together. We do not see a stage of greater maturity at which distinct organs become undifferentiated, and we see in social history that organs once developed have a strong persistence. The process is not entirely irreversible, since organisms die and civilisations, in their declining phase, may revert to less elaborated structures. Yet it does appear possible to identify an underlying drive in social development towards structures consisting of greater numbers of more clearly differentiated and therefore interrelating organs.

The second is the argument from scripture. Some of the texts from Bahai scripture have already been cited, and need not be repeated. These state emphatically that temporal power and responsibility has been delegated by God to Kings and rulers, and that this is “divinely preserved from annulment.”⁴⁷ In a work addressed to a Shi`ih cleric in which Baha’u’llah advances scriptural arguments for the legitimacy of the state, he chooses one Qur’anic and one New Testament text: “Obey God and obey the Apostle, and those among you invested with authority”

⁴⁷ Baha’u’llah, *Kitab-i `Ahd*, as cited above (see note 40).

and “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”⁴⁸ Other texts could be cited. The construction of scriptural arguments from the Christian and Islamic scriptures is important for those communities, but must be left to them.

The third argument will seek to go beyond ‘it is written’ to an understanding of the reasons why it is written, and to argue the point so far as possible in a common language. To do so will require a little metaphysics.

The kingdom of names

Baha’u’llah refers to kings and rulers as “the manifestations of the power, the grandeur and the majesty of God”; “the symbols of the power of God”; “the mirrors of the gracious and almighty name of God”; “the emblems of His sovereignty”; or of “His own power”; “the manifestations of affluence and power and the daysprings of sovereignty and glory”; God’s “shadow amongst men, and the sign of His power unto all that dwell on earth”; “the manifestations of power and the dawning-places of might”.⁴⁹ Such titles reflect Baha’u’llah’s concern with the theology of governance per se, and not his support for legitimacy of a particular ruler or form of government. In fact he predicted the overthrow of some of the kings he addressed, and the end of absolute monarchy as a form of government. He is presenting a theology of governance, “a sovereignty recognised as derived from the Name of God”.⁵⁰

This is a very ‘high’ theology of the state. It should however be distinguished from ‘divine right’ claims, i.e., that the king is personally appointed to authority by God, by virtue of

⁴⁸ Qur’an 4:62 and Mark 12:17, cited in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, 89--90.

⁴⁹ Sources (in order): *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 89; Lawh-i Maqsúd, in *Gleanings*, CXII, p. 218; *ibid*, in *Proclamation of Baha’u’llah*, p. 115; *Kitab-i Aqdas* paragraph 82; Letter to Nabil-i A`zam, in *Gleanings*, XXXIX, p. 304; *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 30; Letter to Nasiri’d-Din Shah, in *Proclamation of Baha’u’llah*, page 58; Lawh-i Dunya, in *Tablets of Baha’u’llah*, page 90. Other titles are found in passages already cited, in *Kalimat-i Firdawsiyyih (Tablets of Baha’u’llah)*, page 65), the *Lawh-i Ishraqat (Tablets of Baha’u’llah)*, pages 130, 126) and so on. Most of these titles come from texts addressed to the Bab and Baha’is, to people generally or to Shi’ih clergy. When he addresses the kings and rulers, the tone may be quite different “Ye are but vassals, O kings of the earth!” (*Kitab-i Aqdas*, paragraph 82).

⁵⁰ *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, pages 40-41, a self-citation from the earlier Tablet to Nasiri’d-Din Shah, in *Proclamation of Baha’u’llah*, page 59.

birth. It also differs from the Pauline conception (Romans 13:1--8), in which the ruler is “the servant of God to execute His wrath”. In both cases existing rulers are regarded as a necessary part of the divine ordinance for their time, but that will is arbitrary in the sense that it reflects God’s provision for a fallen world rather than reflecting the Kingdom and God’s self. In the Pauline case, temporary subjugation to ‘the higher powers’ is a sign of the absence of God rather than His presence.

In the titles of kings and rulers that Baha’u’llah uses, the first part of each title refers to ‘manifestations’, ‘symbols’, ‘mirrors’, ‘emblems’, ‘daysprings’, or ‘sign’, while the second part of the title refers to attributes of God: the power, grandeur, majesty, affluence, power, sovereignty, glory, dominion, authority, might and riches of God. This theology of the state is part of a comprehensive cosmology with affinities to neoplatonic thought and particularly the theology of Ibn `Arabi. In this cosmology the created world -- visible and invisible -- is saturated with the names (or attributes) of God. Every existing thing exists because it manifests attributes of God, and it exists to manifest those attributes as perfectly as its own station permits.⁵¹ The human person has the unique potential to manifest all of these attributes, and also to perceive these ‘realities’ or essences by the power of the mind and to understand the universal principles that flow from the relations between them.⁵²

The attributes or names of God emanate from the unknowable Godhead through successive levels of realisation in much the same way as ideas, in platonic philosophy, exist first in the world of forms and are realised, to a greater or lesser degree, in the material world.⁵³ For

⁵¹ See for example Baha’u’llah, Commentary on a verse by Sa`di, in *Gleanings*, XCIII, page 94.

⁵² See for example Baha’u’llah, untitled work (Bi-ism-i mahbub-i `alamiyan) in *Gleanings* LXXXIV, p. 166; `Abdu’l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 208--209; *Selections from the Writings of `Abdu’l-Baha*, pp. 61--62, 157.

⁵³ While this metaphysics has much in common with neo-platonic philosophies, six important characteristics should be noted. In the first place, emanation is the free act of a God who desires to be known, rather than an involuntary process. In the second place, platonic thought has tended to consider the unique qualities of things as unimportant, whereas in this scheme both the ‘essence’ and the individuality of things are signs of God (*Selections from the Writings of Abdu’l-Baha*, p. 41). Thirdly, matter is not undifferentiated potential, it possesses its own attributes which interact with essences to produce the individualities of things: the manifestations of ‘sovereignty’, for instance, properly vary according to the national cultures in which sovereignty is manifest. Fourthly, platonism and the classical world-view in general is imbued with a pattern of decline over time, such that any change tends to

instance, the attribute of ‘sovereignty’ is expressed in the archangelic and angelic realms in the form of beings whom Baha’u’llah refers to as the “monarchs of the realms of the Kingdom”.⁵⁴ At another level, the ‘Manifestations of God’ (the founders of religions) embody this attribute, as does human government, and archotypically monarchs.⁵⁵ But as we have seen in the discussion of the Kitab-i Iqan, the sovereignty of religious leaders, including the Messiah, operates in a different dimension to that of human governments: the latter is not simply a diminished or delegated version of the former. Sovereignty is reflected in another way in the Bahai administrative institutions, because their authority is derived from the Writings of Baha’u’llah and ‘Abdu’l-Baha, and in yet another way in the sovereignty of any individual who ‘knows with his own knowledge’, who has made an epistemological declaration of independence. Thus a single attribute, shining as it were from the Godhead through the worlds of God, is refracted from the diverse realities in various shapes and colours in which we can recognise a certain family resemblance. Conversely, human beings can respond to the sovereignty of God in all these forms in appropriate ways: by adoring the Godhead, by recognising and following the Manifestation of God, by obeying their governments and fulfilling the duties of good citizenship. While the one attribute can be recognised in all these forms, the responses to it must differ: it would be equally improper to respond to an encounter with the Messiah by calling for a vote, or to respond to an earthly government with adoration. This process of emanation is not a

be interpreted as a further deviation from the original ideal. In the Baha’i cosmology, since God is always ‘the Creator’, this name of God must always be expressed in a process of creation. Supposing that this ‘creation’ involves not just replication but also the generation of new ideas, the universe is not a machine running down but an evolving ecosystem, progressing towards perfection and increasing diversity. The progressive perfection and differentiation achieved in human history is one expression of the process of emanation. Fifth, since the drive of creation is God’s impulse to self-expression, and matter is the final locus for this expression, matter is not dualistically opposed to spirit. The expression of the names of God in the material is the teleological endpoint rather than the most distant and attenuated instance of emanation. Finally, neoplatonic philosophers are free to propose anything as an ‘idea’, which can be dangerous, because it can be theorised that there are distinct essences or ideas animating one race, one culture or, in feminist essentialism, differentiating men from women. The Baha’i model is less flexible, since not every concept is an essence. Essences are attributes of God, and the words which we are licensed to use in relation to God are derived from revelation. Since there is no scriptural warrant for ‘God the American’, ‘God the male’ or ‘God the Baha’i, there are no grounds for theories of manifest destiny for any society, or for institutional distinctions by race, sex or religion within a society.

⁵⁴ *Proclamation of Baha’u’llah* pp. 29-30, see also *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, p. 212.

⁵⁵ Baha’u’llah, in the ‘Tablet of Bisharat’, *Tablets of Baha’u’llah*, p. 28.

question of successive dilution as one moves ‘further’ from the Godhead, but rather of differing manifestation of the attributes of God in differing materials. The responses required therefore differ in kind, and not just in degree.

Now it will be recalled that the passage in the *Kitab-i Aqdas* which repudiates any claim to temporal rule and claims instead “the hearts of men” continues “To this testifieth the Kingdom of Names, could ye but comprehend it.” The question arises, why should Baha’u’llah refer to this metaphysical scheme to justify the separation of the spheres of civil government and of religion in the central text of his faith? So far as I know, he does not provide any direct answer, so I pass here from the exegetical role of the theologian to the creative -- or speculative -- role. In doing so I am encouraged by the epistemological optimism of the Bahai Faith. While it is a religion of revelation, this is a revelation which does not demand unthinking acceptance, but rather leads us as students to develop our own capacity to perceive realities and understand the relationships between them. The decrees of revelation -- of which the separation of church and state is one -- are not simply to be accepted as the arbitrary will of the prophet:

Briefly, the supreme Manifestations of God are aware of the reality of the mysteries of beings. Therefore, They establish laws which are suitable and adapted to the state of the world of man, for religion is the essential connection which proceeds from the realities of things ...⁵⁶

The first step in a speculative theology of the state is to propose that, since human individuals can manifest attributes of God such as generosity, creativity, knowledge and sovereignty, human

⁵⁶ `Abdu'l-Baha, in *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 158-159. It is in this sense that the Baha’i Faith is said to be ‘scientific in nature’, for science is conceptualized as the study of nature (including human nature) and nature “is but the essential properties and the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things” (`Abdu'l-Baha, *Tablet to August Forel*, Oxford, George Ronald, 1978, p. 20). The explanatory power of science, in this model, derives from an understanding of these necessary relations. For instance, from the relationship between pressure and the number, speed and mass of gaseous molecules the behaviour of a gas can be predicted. It should be noted that this is a theological conceptualization of what science is doing. Religion cannot impose this on science as a self-conceptualisation, just as science cannot expect its models of religion to also function as religious self-understandings.

acts can also do so, for a reality which does not drive towards expression is no reality at all.⁵⁷ If human acts manifest the attributes of God, so do human projects and the social organs which embody them: charity reflects the name of God ‘the Giver’; the arts reflect ‘the Creator’, science reflects ‘questions’ (which in Baha’i theology is an attribute of God), systematic knowledge reflects ‘the All-knowing’, and the civil state reflects the sovereignty of God the King. This provides the theo-logical grounding for the model of the organic unity of social structures which was proposed above.

The second step in building a theological justification of the existence of the state is to propose that the names and attributes of God are ontologically distinct. According to the apophatic theology common to all the Western religious traditions, the Godhead is unknowable and indescribable. The names that are attributed to God are applied only by God’s permission, and in the sense of the double negative: ‘God the forgiving’ is a shorthand for ‘God’s self-revelation in history permits us to say that our God is not an unforgiving God’. However we ourselves can both know and manifest attributes such as ‘goodness’, ‘mercy’ and ‘sovereignty’: the realities or essences of things which are also the names of God. For epistemological purposes, therefore, there is an unbridgeable gap between the kingdom of names and the Godhead. As we have seen above, interrelation and multiplicity (love, and ‘the divine twoness of things’) are proper to the creation, while unicity is proper to the Godhead. Multiplicity and interrelation require ontological distinction. To consider that the distinctions between the divine attributes are merely artifacts of human languages would imply that unicity is not unique to the Godhead, but extends to this realm which in turn is accessible to our reason. The implication would be that we can reason our way to God. Moreover, since the emanation of the kingdom of names constitutes creation and we are part of that creation, unicity would then extend to ourselves, and we are God. Neither of these is an acceptable conclusion within the framework of

⁵⁷ This is taken here as self-evident. It could also be argued scripturally, from the role of expression as the motive force in the theology of creation, for instance from the tradition “I was a hidden treasure and desired to be known, therefore I created thee”, but the purpose here is to argue from the attributes of God in creation, and not from the scriptures of any one tradition.

the Western religious tradition. Therefore it is the path of greater piety to suppose that unicity is not a property of the Kingdom of Names: in other words that the attributes of God are ontologically distinct. Then there is some reality called variously the sovereignty or majesty or dominion of God, or the name 'God the King' (here we encounter the inadequacy of language and the variety of languages), and another reality which is God the Revealer, and which is distinct from the first, but closely related to it. And it follows that the Kingdom of God is growing where church and state also are distinct, but closely related.

Implications

The premise of monotheistic religion⁵⁸ has been used here to provide a religious rationale for embracing the multi-centred post-modern society, and for rejecting social models in which one or other human project is supposed to serve as co-ordinator and standard of value for all others. To use the anthropological metaphor, neither the life of the body nor the human soul are resident in a single organ. This explicitly means that religion renounces any claim to have a unique dignity before God. Religious institutions have no monopoly on the sacred. Religion recognises that the project of civil government has an inherent right to exist, and not merely as a necessary evil or a mediator to ensure civil rights in a plural society. The co-ordination of the organs in the organic body politic results from the inherent harmony between the logics proper to each, and this harmony has two causes: an ultimate cause, which is that the names of God are distinct but have common reference to one God, and an immediate cause in the internal harmony of the human agents. Society does not consist of cities peopled separately by the tribes of public figures, artists, scientists and people of faith. Rather, each person potentially embodies all of the attributes of God, and so holds multiple citizenship of all of these cities, functioning and developing in each according to its laws, harmonising them within his or her own person. This is in accordance with the individualism of the Baha'i writings, and the progressive

⁵⁸ The model is not exclusive to Western societies. But the part of the argument required to go from 'The Lord your God is one God' to a multi-centred social order would be redundant if one begins with the Hindu pantheon.

individualisation of post-modern society. The basic unit of society is not the church, the state or the family but the individual.⁵⁹

Thus the theology of the state, and the church-state relationship, has been integrated in a Baha'i systematic theology. The reality of sovereignty, and hence the relationship between revelation and sovereignty, are seen projected in five dimensions: in the human person, in political theology (church-state relations), ecclesiology (the role of the Baha'i administrative order vis-a-vis the *Mashriqu'l-Adhkar*), in eschatology or the Kingdom of God, and in theology proper. It is hoped that this will provide a constructive theoretical basis for the Baha'is in their increasing interactions with national and international authorities. And it may be that the approach outlined here can be of use for those of other Faiths.

Comments from the author, added April 2012:

My comment regarding the theoretical denial of state authority in Shi'ih doctrine has been substantially modified in my *dissertation Church and State: a postmodern political theology* (2005).

Note 1, regarding the placing and effacing of the separation of church and state in lists of Bahai teachings, could be enriched by reference to one of Abdu'l-Baha's lists of Baha'i teachings, in which the ninth teaching begins: "Ninth, religion is separated from politics. Religion does not enter into political matters." This shows that the more usual formulations in the Bahai literature in English, that Bahais do not enter into politics, or that the Bahai Faith is non-political, reflect an underlying principle known in the West as the separation of church and state, a principle that applies to "the leaders of religion" (in Abdu'l-Baha's words), and does not exclude believers from the political sphere. The Persian text is available in *Khatabat-e Abdu'l-Baha* vol. 1 pp 29- (online at <http://reference.bahai.org/fa/t/ab/KA1/ka1-31.html>) and my translation is online at <http://wp.me/pcgF5-1wd> or in full: <http://senmcglinn.wordpress.com/2010/10/27/eleven-essentials-the-bahai-principles-as-taught-by-abdul-baha-in-london/>.

Note 6, regarding sources for the Writings of Baha'u'llah, refers to the Leiden List of the Writings of Baha'u'llah. The most recent release of this list can be consulted online at <http://senmcglinn.wordpress.com/leiden-list/>.

Footnote 35 states that a separate paper on how theocratic ideas entered the Bahai secondary literature is in preparation. It has since been published: *Theocratic assumptions in Bahai*

⁵⁹ This is developed further in McGlenn, S., *Toward the Enlightened Society*, *Bahai Studies Review*, vol. 4 no. 1, 1994.

Literature' in Fazel and Danesh (eds) *Reason and Revelation: new directions in Baha'i thought*, Kalimat, 2002.

Abdu'l-Baha's *Resaleh-ye Siyasiyyeh* is discussed in this paper (see note 38) on the basis of Cole's translation. I have since prepared a critical text based on the Bombay and Cairo editions, and my translation of this has been published online at <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/trans/vol7/govern.htm>