

Seeking for truth

Plausibility alignment on a Baha'i email list

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Computer-mediated communication and web technologies have been exploited in many religious communities, both by leaders and the rank and file. The technologies allow instantaneous and interactive communication on a global scale, but these features are utilized in different ways, depending, among other things, on whether the websites are set up by the leadership or by the members at large. In the first case, the interactive process is typically a way of shaping and controlling the flow of information to a person visiting the website. In the second case, conversational communication on email discussion lists provides spaces where both ongoing and novel issues arising in the course of a community's life can be discussed and adjusted or understood anew. Some of these issues may provoke ideas and views that are neither mainstream nor clearly heretical, but reside in that grey area where a discussion needs to be unofficial.

In what follows, we consider the dynamics of online interaction among members of an independent (i.e. not officially sponsored) Baha'i-oriented discussion group, Talisman, by analysing a single discussion thread. The progress of this thread illustrates an interactive process of seeking truth (or at least shared understanding) and provides an instance of plausibility alignment carried out at the grass roots among a group of Baha'is. Talisman discussants undertook their discursive enterprise without a mandate from or supervision by a Baha'i institution. This factor, and the generally high educational level of participants, made Talisman atypical of Baha'i discussion lists, many of which enjoy sponsorship by agencies of the Baha'i community, and function with full-time moderators.

Plausibility alignment

The term 'plausibility alignment', adopted from Jill McMillan (1988), denotes a process by which a religious community – it could be any social group – maintains a correspondence between its worldview and information impinging on the group from the social context in which it resides. The process is crucial to the ongoing viability of a community whose members are beset by competing messages and truth claims from the broader social

milieu. McMillan's piece was based on the work of Peter Berger. In *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), Berger and his collaborator Thomas Luckmann described the critical importance of 'plausibility structures' – social bases and processes that support and maintain particular social worlds. These 'structures' need to be constantly reinforced through social processes, largely though not exclusively through conversations among members of the social group. In *The Sacred Canopy* (1967), Berger considered some implications of his findings for religious institutions. Among other points, he argued that 'secularization' created an unprecedented situation: religious legitimations of the world 'have lost their plausibility not only for a few intellectuals . . . but for broad masses of entire societies' (Berger 1967: 124). For Berger, secularization was critically linked to 'pluralism'. In pluralistic situations, religions have to compete not only with one another but also with the reality-defining agencies of society at large – government, the media, the scientific establishment, and so forth. Berger wrote, 'A "religious preference" can be abandoned as readily as it was first adopted' (1967: 134). 'As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be marketed. It must be "sold" to a clientele that is no longer constrained to "buy"' (1967: 138). To remain credible, religions are forced to re-evaluate continuously and adaptively and adjust themselves in light of what the public at large and their own adherents generally find believable. Though Berger does not use the term, the processes referred to as globalization have extended the parameters of pluralism and exacerbated this situation.

In her article, McMillan undertook a survey of literature which elucidated various aspects of the concept of plausibility alignment. She argued that 'the loss of plausibility presents a rhetorical problem to the religious institution' (McMillan 1988: 327), and illustrated this point through a case study of a major Christian denomination's wrestling with the issue of sexism. She focused on a formal position paper prepared by the Presbyterian Church of the United States. McMillan noted how the paper had been crafted to be acceptable to audiences both without and within the church (the latter audience being the more important) and, simultaneously, to break new ground by presenting, though in a very mild and tentative way, a new statement regarding sexist language. The exercise described by McMillan was carried out under the auspices of church authorities; examples of similar productions could be found to illustrate very similar processes across a wide range of religious groups, including the Baha'i religion.

The present chapter, on the other hand, considers an instance of plausibility alignment carried out by a group of Baha'is at the grass-roots level who were concerned about issues of 'credibility', but who carried no official mandate or sanction for their activity.

The globe-spanning interactive capability of the Internet is exceedingly well suited for facilitating plausibility alignment in a dispersed group. In the

Baha'i context, electronic discussion lists offer participants a way to bypass the religion's restrictions regarding publication of material that has not been institutionally reviewed (Warburg 2003). However, for the leadership of a religion, it is probably not possible to permit a grass-roots process of plausibility alignment to result directly in formal changes in religious doctrine or presentation. To do so would be to allow the process to intrude upon a core responsibility of the religious leadership, that of collectively acknowledged interpretation.

Baha'i online

The Baha'i religion has its origins in a Shi'ite millenarian movement, which rose in Iran in the middle of the nineteenth century. The movement was called Babism after its prophet-leader, Ali Muhammad Shirazi (1819–1850), known as the Bab. The Babi movement broke with Islam in 1848 and became engaged in a series of bloody conflicts with the Iranian government. The movement had been all but crushed by 1852, but Babism was revived and transformed into the Baha'i religion by Mirza Husayn Ali Nuri (1817–1892), known as Baha'u'llah. Baha'is believe that he was not only the prophet and founder of a religious community but was the 'promised one of all religions', whose mission was to establish the 'Most Great Peace,' the 'Kingdom of God on Earth'. Baha'u'llah's son, Abdu'l-Baha (1844–1921), later became the leader of the Baha'i religion, and he again was succeeded by his grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957). During the twentieth century, through systematic missionary efforts, the Baha'i religion spread all over the world. Today, the religion has a collective leadership of nine elected men who constitute the highest authoritative Baha'i body, the Universal House of Justice, situated in the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, Israel. All Baha'i communities around the world refer to the Universal House of Justice in administrative and spiritual matters. The most sacred places on earth for the Baha'is are the shrines of Baha'u'llah and of the Bab, both situated in the Haifa area, and Haifa is therefore also a place of pilgrimage for Baha'is.

The official Baha'i website, The Baha'i World, is an apt illustration of Christopher Helland's characterization of an 'official' World Wide Web presence: 'Official web sites are often professionally designed; the information presented and the environments created are controlled spaces where nothing is left to chance. In this way the religious organization is attempting to continue their institutional control and structure on-line' (Helland 2002: 295). www.bahai.org provides an attractive public gateway with links to brief introductory information about the religion and to texts and pictures illustrative of its view of itself as a global community. The site is professionally maintained and kept current with news of recent Baha'i events and accomplishments, and offers links to similar websites sponsored by some sixty national Baha'i communities throughout the world. This cluster of

websites constitutes the principal formal presence of the religion in cyberspace.

At the other end of the information spectrum, websites sponsored by individuals and, more importantly, discussion groups organized to exchange views about the religion represent unofficial Baha'i cyber presences. These spaces, which are not reachable from The Baha'i World, allow relatively free-flowing and casual discussion of aspects of Baha'i life. To illustrate some of the dynamics of online interaction, and, importantly, an instance of plausibility alignment, we shall consider a Talisman discussion thread from April 1995. As we intend to explore the text of the thread more deeply than is usually done in sociological literature, we will have to content ourselves with consideration of a single thread. This thread is one of many hundreds that could have been selected from Talisman to illustrate the same processes.

Online plausibility negotiation – a Talisman thread

Talisman, which functioned from October 1994 until May 1996, was created to be an academically oriented forum for open and serious discussion of Baha'i history, theology, administration, and community life.¹ It was created and managed by an American Baha'i university professor and open to members of the religion as well as to non-members. A few basic rules governed the group: discussions were un-moderated, but were expected to be courteous and based on evidence; participants were to avoid abusive language, ad-hominem arguments and accusations of heresy.

Despite its open membership policies, the overwhelming majority of participants on Talisman were Baha'is (there were also a handful of former Baha'is). Most 'Talismanians' were Western-educated; the group was predominantly male and included a number of Baha'i intellectuals, among them journalists, professors, graduate students, and published scholars in such fields as Middle East studies, religious studies, history, anthropology, sociology, the natural sciences, and engineering. A number of Talisman participants, while well educated, were not academics. What transpired through the numerous discussion threads that unfolded and ramified on the list was, generally, an ongoing interrogation of the community's received knowledge and current understandings in the light of prevailing academic attitudes and standards. It should be noted, however, that there were also a good many (intentionally) humorous postings to the list. Significantly, the undertaking was initiated by Baha'is who felt the need for a forum in which to discuss issues that were of concern to many of them. Though similar discussions had taken place at Baha'i study classes in various locales, the quantity, quality, and speed of dissemination of such discussions were unprecedented.

The thread to be analysed here ran from 11 to 17 April 1995; its subject was the so-called Mount Carmel Project at the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa.

This project involved the erection of three major buildings at a site Baha'is referred to as the 'Arc', and the construction of an adjacent set of terraces and gardens surrounding the Shrine of the Bab and stretching nearly one kilometre up and down the slope of Mount Carmel. Shoghi Effendi originally planned both parts of the project, and two other buildings of the Arc had been completed earlier. The project was at that time well under way (the terraces were officially inaugurated on 22 May 2001).

According to popular Baha'i belief, the completion of the Mount Carmel Project would coincide in time with the 'Lesser Peace', a worldwide political peace settlement spoken of in Baha'i scriptures. This expectation originated in letters written by Shoghi Effendi. Addressing the Baha'is of the world in 1954 about the projected construction of the 'International Baha'i Archives' on Mount Carmel (the first of the buildings of the Arc), and extolling the spiritual significance of the project, Shoghi Effendi (1958: 74–75) wrote that

The raising of this Edifice will in turn herald the construction, in the course of successive epochs of the Formative Age of the Faith, of several other structures, which will serve as the administrative seats of such divinely appointed institutions as the Guardianship, the Hands of the Cause, and the Universal House of Justice . . .

This vast and irresistible process, unexampled in the spiritual history of mankind, and which will synchronize with two no less significant developments – the establishment of the Lesser Peace and the evolution of Baha'i national and local institutions – the one outside and the other within the Baha'i world – will attain its final consummation in the Golden Age of the Faith . . . the advent of the Kingdom of the Father repeatedly lauded and promised by Jesus Christ.

From statements in the writings of Abdu'l-Baha, many Baha'is had come to believe that the Lesser Peace would appear around the end of the twentieth century (Piff and Warburg 2003). This expectation became a matter of some urgency when the extensive building projects begun in the early 1990s were proceeding, since Shoghi Effendi had said that these developments and the Lesser Peace would 'synchronize'. It was therefore not entirely surprising that Baha'i World Centre workers were heard to comment, 'with every stone laid, forces are being released in the world', or that 'whenever we dig into God's holy mountain, another old world order institution collapses' (Piff 2000).

Magic or foresight?

Space prohibits our fully discussing every message posted to the 'Arc' thread, but enough will be quoted to delineate its dynamics and identify the most important ideas dealt with.² In particular, the participants struggled with the possible connection between the completion of the project and developments

in world affairs. Such causality might be inferred from Shoghi Effendi's prediction, and some Talisman participants obviously had difficulties in reconciling it with their academic background and the Baha'i doctrine of the harmony of religion and science. On 11 April 1995, a Baha'i academic from New Zealand initiated the discussion on Talisman:

A . . . fellow academic currently investigating the writings [has asked,] can the Baha'is prove a connection between the establishment of Lesser Peace and the completion of the Arc? If so, can we do it now or only in hindsight?³

Almost immediately, a Talisman participant, an American academic, responded:

In my . . . opinion, there is no connection between the building of the Arc and the establishment of the Lesser Peace. Certainly it is true that building these building[s] will not and cannot bring about the Lesser Peace in some magical way. Baha'is just look ridiculous to thinking people when they talk that way.⁴

Another participant quickly took issue with this view:

It's not magic . . . it's scientifically based (if you want me to go into proofs and derivations etc we would have to first prove existence of God, then of other spiritual worlds etc etc but we would get there . . .) and these 'thinking people' are not taking into account that there are other spiritual worlds that interact with this world . . .⁵

And another chimed in, agreeing,

You have said it all! . . . These 'thinking people' are part of the problem! In fact, it is an essential aspect of Baha'i 'world view' – for the lack of a better term – that these two worlds (spiritual and material) are intimately interrelated and affect each other.⁶

However, another member, also an academic, responded forcefully:

Actually, I thought [TL] said it all. The way Baha'is discuss the Arc is considered 'magical' thinking. The buildings going up on Mt. Carmel are viewed by these 'thinking people' that some dismiss with a wave of a magic wand, as 'power art,' an effort to show the power of the Baha'i Faith and its administration . . .

Alas, the social and economic development plans seem to have lost out in the process of raising funds for these buildings. I fear that the fact

that they are sitting in Israel – a country almost universally scorned in the world – is going to backfire on the Faith terribly. I wish we were putting our resources into human development, rather than into marble.⁷

In the postings quoted thus far one can already observe one of the most important characteristics of *Talisman* – its tendency to expose ideological divisions in the community – in this case between those who, in direct if not trenchant language, questioned prevalent Baha’i understandings and those who sought to maintain or defend more mainstream views. Also evident in the thread, at least in the post quoted just above, is dissatisfaction with the decisions of Baha’i leadership – here expressed as regret that Baha’is use their funds to erect monumental administrative buildings rather than to address human needs and problems more directly. As the Universal House of Justice, as a matter of Baha’i belief, is viewed as infallible, such a comment was bound to provoke a reaction.

A follow-up post, directed to LW and copied to *Talisman*, set out to prove the validity of Shoghi Effendi’s statement regarding synchronization, and the Universal House of Justice’s decision to pursue the Mount Carmel project at this time:

I’ll try and put it as scientifically as possible so as to not be considered too ‘magical’ . . .

Step one . . . through complex calculus and lots of being a thinking person one comes to the conclusion that there is a Creator, God, Supreme Being, Allah.

Step two . . . this ‘God’ must communicate with created beings so Manifestations are sent at periods of about every 1,000 years (again record of history, analogies of sun and mirrors etc etc can prove this).

Step three . . . at this time in history the Manifestation which has inaugurated a new Universal Cycle was Baha’u’llah (complex calculus, *Kitab-i-Iqan*, Bible proofs, Quran proofs, whatever it takes to prove this).

Step four . . . Baha’u’llah, . . . ordains that a body called the ‘Universal House of Justice’ should guide the community of the followers of Baha’u’llah (and in a certain sense the world in general). This body has ‘conferred infallibility’ and all who follow Baha’u’llah joyfully submit to the decisions of this Supreme Body.

Step five . . . This same Supreme Body, in following the instructions of Baha’u’llah, . . . the wishes of Abdul Baha and expositions of Shoghi Effendi, decide and communicate in a letter of August 31, 1987 that the remaining buildings on the Arc are to be completed at this time of history. Moreover, this Supreme Body decides that these buildings will be built in Israel . . . whatever the rest of the world may think about Israel . . .

Shoghi Effendi, whose authority can be derived . . . from the Will of Abdul Baha states . . . that there is a synchronization between the completion of the Arc, the maturation of LSA's and the establishment of the Lesser Peace . . .

Now . . . was there any magic in any of that? Is there any question about whether the Baha'i world should or should not be doing this?

Thinking people can think what they want . . . but based on the above . . . I think the A+ goes to the instructions of the Universal House of Justice and expositions of Shoghi Effendi rather than the doubts and criticisms of thinking people.⁸

The following day, the same participant, SP, posted two messages containing several pages of quotations from Shoghi Effendi's writings regarding the Arc and the Lesser Peace. His first message began, 'Assuming we all accept equations 1-5, perhaps looking directly at the texts could help our consultation on the Arc . . .'⁹ SP included texts that most Talisman subscribers presumably knew well and considered authoritative, and interspersed them with his own comments in which he argued for a connection between the two 'variables'.¹⁰ The message failed to elicit any direct reply.

Another poster, putting a positive spin on the notion of 'power art', stated, 'There is something powerful about marble – it exudes authority, reverence, strength, cleanliness, durability, refinement. It is metamorphic beyond its mere creation.' He continued, 'The Arc is God's metropolis for at least a thousand years – it is an extremely rare bounty to have a part in its birth.'¹¹ In a separate message, the same individual suggested that 'the completion of the buildings by itself is not what is going to bring about the Lesser Peace, it is the maturation that we must go through to achieve that goal which is significant'.¹² Another participant discounted the expressed concern about the location of the Baha'i World Centre in Israel. 'In fact,' he wrote, 'a Muslim threw [this] in my face once, accusing the Baha'is of supporting the Zionist state by sending money there.' He continued:

I asked him if he sent money to Mecca. He said he did not, that Saudi Arabia took care of the Holy Shrines there. I replied that the . . . money we send . . . does not go to the 'Zionist' government, but to take care of our properties.

In short, I say, let it be a teaching tool! We have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of regarding what we are doing on the Mountain of God!

O, and is that mountain magical??? Every pilgrim I've talked to thinks so.¹³

A great deal of the thread explored the issue of synchronization and causation. One poster argued that Shoghi Effendi had never intended to

imply a causal connection between events when he wrote that the building of administrative edifices at the Baha'i World Centre would synchronize with the Lesser Peace.¹⁴ Another wrote that though synchronicity is not understood as a causal connection, 'can one say . . . this means they are absolutely coincidental; that there is no connection between them, even a connection which might exist in the Mind of God?'¹⁵ Another remarked, 'Synchronous events can occur quite naturally when the same underlying conditions that foster the occurrence of one also foster the occurrence of the other . . . [A condition of] relative international stability that could lead to the lesser peace would also encourage the building of the Arc.'¹⁶ Another participant, a historian, explained in more detail:

If one believes that a state of Lesser Peace will come in the short term of future history; and one believes that Baha'is will build edifices in Haifa in the same time frame; then there is nothing illogical in saying that these two developments will synchronize while not positing a connection between them.

Because of the advent of weapons of mass destruction . . . large-scale world wars are no longer feasible as rational policy decisions. Thus, the Lesser Peace, the peace of Mutually Assured Destruction, is approaching . . . Shoghi Effendi was keenly aware of the significance of Hiroshima.

One could on the other hand predict that in the short term (within 75 years), the Baha'i community would grow to the point where it would need to build the Arc; this could have been extrapolated from the 10-year World Crusade itself . . .

There is no rational basis for asserting that the synchronicity of these developments has a causal character. Why should paying workmen to build buildings affect international diplomacy? Any connection can only be . . . in the minds of Baha'is.

The building of the Arc is well underway, and clearly has some major advantages for the international administration of the Faith. But this effort . . . has been a major drain on local resources, leaving us with far fewer local [centres] than we need.

It seems to me that it is legitimate for Baha'is to express a strong preference that, once this major building initiative is completed, a couple of decades of investment in local communities should be initiated.¹⁷

A final posting to the thread suggested another solution to the question of synchronization/causation:

That processes are synchronous without being causally related (to each other or to a common 3rd) is possible [but] not most likely. That erecting some buildings in Haifa will cause the world's peoples to recognize their interdependence and help to make their politicians ready to effectuate

that interdependence is not entirely impossible – but very nearly. When the impossible has been eliminated, what remains, in this case, is that the synchronous processes are coordinated because the House of Justice, observing the accelerating rate of developments in the move towards a world polity, has put its foot on the accelerator to ensure our internal development keeps pace.¹⁸

Interactive seeking for truth

Though in its early stages this thread exposed significant divergences of opinion in the community, it was possible for a Baha'i to come away from reading through the entire series of postings satisfied that a problematic element of the Baha'i worldview had been put into rational perspective: There was nothing magical at work – Shoghi Effendi, an astute observer of history, knew the Lesser Peace could not be far off and exploited this insight to direct the course of the Baha'i community. The Universal House of Justice, in initiating the construction project on Mount Carmel, had acted in the same way. At the same time, nothing in the thread ruled out the possibility that spiritual and material reality were connected. Whatever the reason, the supreme spiritual authority of the Baha'i community had decided to initiate the construction work now, almost everyone thought it was a good thing, and world conditions appeared to foster the undertaking.

Internet threads are artefacts of verbal exchanges performed before largely silent audiences – Talisman had more than a hundred subscribers at this time who chose not to participate in the Arc discussion. Some messages in the thread were addressed to Talisman at large; others were addressed as responses to particular members and simultaneously copied to the group. We, of course, know nothing of messages that might have passed privately between list members but were not copied to the list. As with any electronic discussion group, reading Talisman was a process of following the course of several concurrent conversations, and the Arc thread was interspersed with a number of others that vied for participants' attention.¹⁹

Several of the posts considered here exhibit another noteworthy feature – formulaic expressions of humility (these have been edited out of the extracts presented above). For example, TL prefaced his post with the disclaimer, 'In my very humble, flawed, imperfect and frequently incorrect opinion . . .'²⁰ SP echoed this when commenting on texts from Shoghi Effendi's writings, warning readers that his (SP's) 'personal extremely potentially fallible interpretations' would be marked by asterisks.²¹ SP also noted parenthetically that despite his frequent references to 'equations' and 'variables' he 'hate[d] math – can't you tell!'²² The function of such rhetorical touches was apparently to emphasize the humanity of the poster and, perhaps, soften the force of an opinion, thus increasing the likelihood that the view put forward would be accepted. Instances of humour sprinkled throughout the thread probably

served the same function. Such features are not unique to Talisman and contribute to the social ambience and community feeling of email discussion groups.

It is, of course, impossible to conclude that the actual participants in this thread came away convinced. For example, TL and LW, whose postings had initiated the discussion, posted only a single message each to the thread. We cannot infer from the postings what their motives were to remain silent; lack of interest, frustration, or other things to do (other threads to participate in) may have led them and others to abandon the discussion. Nor were all aspects covered to the extent that it could be said that a conclusion was reached. In particular, the suggestion that construction of monumental buildings was an inappropriate expenditure had not been fully discussed, though one participant suggested that, following completion of the Mount Carmel buildings, it would be appropriate for Baha'is to express a wish for an enhanced programme of local investment.

Taken together, however, the various postings constituted a well-rounded exploration of the issue and suggested a resolution that, while unofficial, was both logical and respectful of the religion's writings and institutions. In this, and in its brevity, the thread we have considered here is somewhat atypical. Many Talisman threads ran on much longer. For example, a thread on Baha'i teachings regarding the virgin birth of Jesus Christ, a very useful example of discursive plausibility alignment, ran for over a month (21 January to 28 February 1996) and, when printed, amounted to seventy-five single-spaced pages. Some recurring questions never reached resolution – notably, that, according to an ordinance of Baha'u'llah, only men and not women are eligible as members of the Universal House of Justice.

The availability of Baha'i email lists and the facility they provide for relatively free discussion of any topic has fostered important developments in the intellectual life of the Baha'i community. In addition, email has permitted creation of a substantial accessible record of the community's internal discourse. On Talisman (and, to a significant though lesser extent, on other Baha'i email lists) prevailing community understandings of Baha'i history, theology, community life, and administrative practice were evaluated and discussed more thoroughly and frankly at the grass-roots level than had previously been possible.

A case of plausibility alignment

We suggest that – speaking very broadly and generally – the 'purview' of Talisman – though never defined in these terms – can be interpreted as an ongoing group exercise in plausibility alignment. The process of plausibility alignment is continual, as external circumstances are constantly changing, and necessitates continual adjustment or revision of the group's ideology (as the members understand it) to correspond with developments in the world

at large. It occurs in leadership circles as well as at the grass roots and helps assure that threats to the group's self-perception arising from such things as dramatic developments in the daily news, problematic aspects of its own ideology, or lapses in the conduct of its members can be managed or neutralized. More generally, the process provides a means by which the community can maintain its collective sense of itself.

Baha'i is a lay religion, governed by elected institutions, and the Baha'i leaders are elected or appointed from the ranks of the community; they are not academically trained theologians or religious scholars. Underlying Baha'i administration is a doctrine referred to as the Covenant, which specifies the leadership succession in the religion, and forbids Baha'is from organizing opposition to it, on penalty of expulsion from the community. Many postings to the thread prominently displayed avowals of loyalty and obedience to the senior Baha'i institutions. The reference to Baha'is 'joyfully submitting' to the decisions of the Universal House of Justice; suggestions that Baha'is, far from concerning themselves with the wisdom of locating the projects in Israel, use this fact as part of their teaching message; affirmations that Mount Carmel is a magical place; expressions of satisfaction at being able to participate in such a historic undertaking – all contrast sharply with one participant's expressed doubts about the project. Indeed, a number of the posts seem to be a sort of implicit shouting down of a member who had displayed sentiments considered inappropriate. Over the course of *Talisman* there were many instances of this, from both the 'heterodox' and 'orthodox' wings of the group.

Almost by definition, the activities on a mailing list such as *Talisman* are of a kind that the leadership of a religious community, as stewards of its public image, would wish to de-emphasize. The Universal House of Justice has expressed concerns regarding the reach and speed of email, and the risks it entails, in a number of communications. In a letter to an individual written on its behalf in 1996 the House of Justice commented,

In the past, discussions among Baha'is would take place orally among groups of friends in private, or at summer schools and other Baha'i events, or in letters between individuals. Inevitably, many erroneous statements were made; not all comments were as temperate as they should have been; many statements were misunderstood by those who heard them . . . Now, the same kind of discussion is spread among a hundred or more people . . . is in a form more durable than speech, and can be disseminated to a vast readership at the touch of a button. Such discussions among Baha'is call for self-restraint and purity of motive as well as cordiality, frankness and openness.²³

The quotation illustrates the dilemma for the Universal House of Justice when a mailing list such as *Talisman* becomes a prominent discussion forum

unconnected to the Baha'i administration. On the one hand, it is a Baha'i principle that the individual has the right and duty independently to seek truth. On the other hand, a group of individuals who collectively seek truth in online discussions have initiated the kind of conversation that normally takes place inside the religious organization. As with any other leadership, the House of Justice could have chosen to endorse the website, and could have appointed high-ranking Baha'is to participate in the discussion. Had that been done, the discussion list would have soon lost its exploratory character, participants would have dropped away and a forum for independent plausibility alignment would have been lost to the community. The Universal House of Justice could also have chosen to ignore the discussion list completely, running the risk that its influence might increase beyond administrative control, or, perhaps more likely, that it would become a major source of intra-community contention. The House of Justice could have ordered that the discussion list be immediately shut down, or, a less drastic step, could have asked American Baha'i authorities to put pressure on individual posters to exercise restraint or self-censorship in expression of their views. This was apparently the course of action followed, and eventually led to the closing of the list (see Cole 1998).²⁴

The propensity of email discussions to become contentious is well documented, and Talisman was no exception.²⁵ Put in terms of plausibility alignment, Talisman participants were unable, in the end, to find ways to adjust a number of critical disjunctures in community opinion, but continued to argue and explore these difficult issues even after most participants probably recognized that the discussions were no longer productive.

In its initial phase, Talisman seemed a successful exercise in bypass, in that free discussion of weighty community issues was facilitated by the Internet. Initially, the group functioned without interference from Baha'i institutions. However, the fact that it was closed demonstrates that groups such as Talisman are not just entities floating in cyberspace. They also represent a group of people who are under obligations elsewhere and whose decisions to contribute to the discussion must take into account the requirement that as members of the Baha'i religion they should not ignore serious advice or instructions from the Baha'i organization. This instance suggests that the much-heralded bypass opportunity of the Internet may be more of an ideal construction than a reality in many cases.

The query underlying the particular thread analysed – was it meaningful to establish a connection between completion of the Mount Carmel project and the advent of world peace? – brought into focus a number of community concerns, notably the ongoing desire among Baha'is to bring new converts into the community, and to reach 'people of capacity' with its message. Reaching thinking people with the Baha'i message is rendered problematic by Baha'i teachings that appear out of step with contemporary values and by an ambient supernaturalism that permeates both official and popular

Baha'i. A second important issue is the harmony between science and religion – that religious teachings are to accord with reason. Some Baha'is have troubled themselves to disentangle Baha'i teachings both from the extravagances of popular Baha'i culture and from literal understandings of Baha'i scriptures. The references to 'magical thinking', 'power art', and Baha'is looking 'ridiculous' reflect the vehemence of this effort. But a campaign to 'correct' popular understandings is evidently resented by other sections of the community as potentially dangerous and often arrogant. Several dismissive references to 'thinking people' illustrated a view that may be phrased as: Who are these people to question what Shoghi Effendi said or what the Universal House of Justice decided? One poster made a laboured attempt to demonstrate the logical derivation of his belief, apparently to prove that even spiritual realities have a scientific basis.

A third concern intertwined with the thread is actually a grass-roots version of the same need that brought about the creation of a professionally designed official Baha'i website – the imperative for a religious community to make a good appearance before the world. By hashing out troubling questions through the give and take of email discourse, participants on Talisman (and on other Baha'i associated email lists) sought to assure themselves that Baha'i teachings, properly understood, were not only valid spiritually but harmonious with rational traditions.

Notes

- 1 The history and influence of Talisman and its impact on the Baha'i community's relations with the Internet have been sketched elsewhere; see K. P. Johnson (1997), K. Bacquet (2001) and D. Piff (forthcoming).
- 2 The thread consisted of twenty-one messages posted by thirteen participants, four of whom were women. An edited print of the thread runs to sixteen single-spaced pages. ('Edited' means deletion of repeated material, as when an earlier message is appended to its reply, and deletion of computer routing data, etc., from email address blocks.)
- 3 Posting to Talisman by ML, 'science, religion, Arc' 11 April 1995.
- 4 Posting to Talisman by TL, 'Re: Arc' 12 April 1995.
- 5 Posting to Talisman by SP, 'Re: Arc' 12 April 1995.
- 6 Posting to Talisman by FS, 'Re: Arc – Buildings <-> Lesser Peace' 12 April 1995.
- 7 Posting to Talisman by LW, 'The Arc' 12 April 1995.
- 8 Posting to Talisman by SP, 'Re: The Arc' 12 April 1995.
- 9 Posting to Talisman by SP, 'Arc texts' 13 April 1995.
- 10 Posting to Talisman by SP, 'Lesser peace texts' 13 April 1995.
- 11 Posting to Talisman by SA, 'Re: The Arc' 13 April 1995.
- 12 Posting to Talisman by SA, 'Re: Arc' 12 April 1995.
- 13 Posting to Talisman by MH, 'Re: The Arc' 13 April 1995.
- 14 Postings to Talisman by AR, 'The Arc' and 'Re: The Arc,' 13 and 16 April 1995.
- 15 Posting to Talisman by CM, 'Re: The Arc' 16 April 1995.
- 16 Posting to Talisman by AJ, 'Re[2]: The Arc' 17 April 1995.

- 17 Posting to Talisman by JC, 'Re: The Arc' 16 April 1995. The '10-year World Crusade' refers to a global 'teaching plan', 1953–1963, during which the Baha'i religion enjoyed significant numeric and geographic expansion.
- 18 Posting to Talisman by SM, 'arc synchronization' 17 April 1995.
- 19 Among topics on Talisman during the period 11–17 April 1995 were threads on feminist theory, art, the Aqdas and Baha'i Sharia, Amnesty International, bigamy/polygyny, Covenant-breakers, and Baha'i cemeteries in Iran.
- 20 Posting to Talisman by TL, 'Re: Arc' 12 April 1995.
- 21 Posting to Talisman by SP, 'Arc texts' 13 April 1995.
- 22 Posting to Talisman by SP, 'Lesser peace texts' 13 April 1995.
- 23 Letter to an individual from the Department of the Secretariat, 16 February 1996, posted to Talisman on 20 February 1996. The Secretariat stated that in view of the 'far-reaching problems' to which such discussions can give rise, 'a new level of self-discipline . . . is needed by those who take part'.
- 24 Following the demise of Talisman there were several developments in Baha'i-oriented discussion lists. Bahai-Studies was created by a Baha'i sociologist at an American university for scholarly discussion of Baha'i academic and other issues. List rules explicitly forbade postings critical of the Baha'i administration. Talisman eventually evolved into Talisman9 for 'free and open discussion of issues in the Baha'i faith from an intellectual point of view', but welcomed criticism of Baha'i institutions. H-Bahai was initiated for academic discussion of Babi and Baha'i topics; membership was generally restricted to individuals with advanced degrees in fields relevant to Baha'i studies. Somewhat later, Bridges was created for similar discussions, but with membership by invitation and restricted to Baha'is.
- 25 An example, of many that could be provided, is the often-turbulent history of Nurel-L mailing list, founded by Irving Hexham. Though Nurel-L was moderated, and explicitly devoted to scholarly discussion of new religious movements among professionals and interested members of the general public, it was impossible for Hexham to keep discussions from degenerating into fractiousness (in his case, he had to outlaw discussion of Scientology); see Cowan (2000).

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