

Church and state in the Bahá'í Faith: An epistemic approach

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When Mírzá Ḥusayn 'Alí (1817-92)—the founder of the Bahá'í Faith who was known as Bahá'u'lláh (the “Glory of God”)—died, there was a clear and unambiguous answer about who had the authority to lead his small, but growing, religious community. In his will, Bahá'u'lláh identified his eldest son, 'Abbás Afandí [Effendi], known as 'Abdu'l-Bahá (“Servant of Bahá”) (1844–1921) as his successor and head of the community, as well as the authoritative interpreter of Bahá'u'lláh's writings.¹ When 'Abdu'l-Bahá assumed the reins of community leadership upon Bahá'u'lláh's death, his claim to authority went largely unchallenged, and he remained in that role until his own death.²

While this seeming affirmation of a principle of primogeniture would appear to establish a clear pattern for the future organization and structure of the Bahá'í community, it was only one part of the leadership of the community envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. Equally unambiguous was Bahá'u'lláh's vision of “houses of justice” existing throughout the world, elected bodies that would serve governance functions. In the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (the “Most Holy Book”), written by Bahá'u'lláh in 1873, he states that “[t]he Lord hath ordained that in every city a House of Justice shall be established,” whose members are to “take counsel together and to have regard for the interests of the servants of God”³ In that same book, Bahá'u'lláh contemplated an international house of justice, in addition to the local houses of justice.⁴

Leadership and governance of the community, despite very minor schisms, have recently reached the point where the principle of elected

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¹ Adib Taherzadeh, *The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 143–144 (George Ronald, 1992) (including a full translation of Bahá'u'lláh's will in English). See also Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith*, pp. 204–210 (2nd ed., Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1956).

² See *God Passes By*, ch. 14–21 (Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1974) for details on 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life.

³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 29 (Universal House Justice, 1992).

⁴ *idem*, p. 35.

institutions leading the community has been fully established, and the authority vested in single individuals who descend from Bahá'u'lláh has come to an end.⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament clearly and unequivocally appointed his grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957), then a student at Oxford, to be the “Guardian” of the Bahá'í Faith and the interpreter of the sacred writings, and provided that the Guardianship could pass down through the male descendants of Shoghi Effendi.⁶ But, at the same time, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who during his life had begun the process of institution building, made clear that the evolution of the community would be toward the election of houses of justice locally, nationally, and internationally. Shoghi Effendi made the construction of this “Administrative Order” a cornerstone of his thirty-six years as head of the Bahá'í Faith.⁷ When Shoghi Effendi died childless in 1957, de facto the door was closed on the era of individual leadership in the Bahá'í Faith. The community carried out Shoghi Effendi's plan to elect the first Universal House of Justice⁸ in 1963, and with that event the transfer from individual charismatic authority to a model of elected institutional authority was complete.

While this transition from individual to institutional authority removed many questions that could have bedevilled the community—including potential disputes among individual claimants—with the emergence of institutional authority, there arises a new set of challenges and questions. Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi never made any claim of political power in the societies in which they lived. But just because individual Bahá'í leaders did not claim political authority from the religion's founding in 1863 until Shoghi Effendi's death in 1957 does not mean that Bahá'u'lláh did not envision some public role for the institutions that would assume the leadership of his religious community. Indeed, many indicators within Bahá'í primary literature⁹ anticipate a role for Bahá'í institutions in civil governance.

⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Bahá'í World Faith*, *supra* n. 1, pp. 204–207.

⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1971).

⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 9, 19, 143–157 (2nd rev. ed., Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1974).

⁸ The Universal House of Justice currently comprises nine members elected for a five-year term. In accordance with Bahá'í electoral principles, there are no political parties or campaigns. The members of the Universal House of Justice are elected by the members of the National Bahá'í elected institutions, which are currently called National Spiritual Assemblies. See Arash Abizadeh, “Democratic Elections Without Campaigns? Normative Bahá'í Foundations of National Bahá'í Elections”, *World Order* 37 (1):7-49 (2005), pp. 7–49 (available at https://bahai-library.com/abizadeh_bahai_elections) (discussing Bahá'í elections).

⁹ The writings of Bahá'u'lláh are considered by Bahá'ís to be revealed by God. The writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi are considered authoritative interpretations of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. The Universal House of Justice was not invested by Bahá'u'lláh with interpretative authority. However, its statements on certain matters are considered infallible and embody the highest Bahá'í institutional authority. For the purposes of this article, the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice are collectively considered to constitute the primary Bahá'í literature.

For example, the terms “Bahá’í state” and “Bahá’í theocracy”¹⁰ appear in authoritative Bahá’í writings, and the Universal House of Justice has spoken of a future that will see the union of spiritual and civil authority.¹¹ In these statements, one finds a reflection of Bahá’u’lláh’s statement that “*all matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice.*”¹² At the same time, however, the primary literature is also laden with statements that imply some form of separation or distinction between civil and religious institutions, to reflect Bahá’u’lláh’s teaching that “[*t*]he one true God ... hath bestowed the government of the earth upon kings That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men’s hearts”¹³

Discussion of the public role, if any, of Bahá’í institutions is in its infancy. This discussion is growing, however, and it is a significant one. The evolution of discussion of issues around “church and state”¹⁴ in the Bahá’í Faith will contribute to the shape of Bahá’í communities and the nature of their interaction with the governments and populations of the countries in which they reside. At the same time, in an era when religious leaders clearly claim more authority in the political sphere around the world, and with the attendant potential dangers, there is value in assessing all growing religious systems and their views on the place of religion in public life.

The goal of this article is to explore some of the challenges in discussing the relationship between religious and civil institutions in the Bahá’í Faith as outlined in primary and secondary literature, and to examine some directions in which such a discussion might develop. After an overview of the conclusions that have been reached in secondary literature on this relationship in the Bahá’í Faith, the article

¹⁰ Such terms appear in the writings of Shoghi Effendi, which include writings on his behalf. See *infra* text accompanying nn. 89–94 (giving quotes of such statements).

¹¹ Ltr. from the Universal House of Justice to anonymous (18 Apr. 2001) (on file with author).

¹² Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh: Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 129 (tr. Habib Taherzadeh, W. & J. Mackay, 1978).

¹³ Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 241 (Bahá’í Pub. Trust, 1971).

¹⁴ The term “church and state” increasingly appears in secondary literature in reference to the Bahá’í Faith. It is a problematic term for a range of reasons, including the fact that there exists no priestly class, power, or function in the Bahá’í Faith, and it adopts a Christian frame of reference. In this article, the phrase “church and state” is used for symmetry with the secondary literature on which the article comments. The reader will note, however, that “church and state” is used interchangeably with references to religious and civil institutions.

examines some themes found in the primary literature to offer new approaches and understandings.

1. Current secondary literature on church and state in the Bahá'í Faith

A traditional view expressed in secondary literature on the Bahá'í Faith—much of it apologetic in nature—has been to assert that Bahá'u'lláh intended the complete integration of Bahá'í institutions with civil government. This tradition has been expressed in various forms throughout Bahá'í history and continues to be expressed today. A typical statement of this view is that “Bahá'í spiritual assemblies will be the local government and the national spiritual assemblies the national government.”¹⁵ Stated another way, “every community, village, town, city, and nation will be under the control of one of these [Houses of Justice].”¹⁶ Such conclusions are often embedded within a consciously evolutionary framework—but with the clear identification of a complete integration of religious and civil institutions as the intended endpoint.

It is recorded, but not accepted as authoritative, that Shoghi Effendi described the stages in the evolution of the Bahá'í Faith:

Obscurity: The first stage is that of obscurity, the stage where, as in South Africa in 1955, the Bahá'í Faith is not known. People pay no attention to it or its followers.

Persecution: This is the stage where the authorities, religious or civil, sense danger to their own institutions. They oppose the Bahá'í Faith and do all they can to harm and obliterate it. It was like this in Persia.

Emancipation: This is where the Bahá'í Faith is known, and the opposition has ceased. The people and authorities tolerate it but pay little attention to it. This was the situation in Egypt in 1955.

¹⁵ John A. Robarts, *A Few Reminiscences about Shoghi Effendi Taken from Pilgrim Notes of January 1955*, from the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly Film Retrospective, and from *Some Other Words of the Beloved Guardian*, in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi 174* (Assn. Bahá'í Stud., 1993). This description is what is called a “Pilgrim Note”, meaning a statement recorded by an individual on pilgrimage of a conversation or utterance of Shoghi Effendi. Pilgrim notes are not considered authoritative, and their use is discouraged in the Bahá'í community.

¹⁶ George Latimer, “The Social Teachings of the Bahai Movement”, p. 7. *Star of the West* 139 (1916). It should be noted Latimer’s discussion is not entirely clear as to whether he foresees the Bahá'í institutions as having judicial, legislative, and executive powers, or only judicial and legislative ones. See infra n. 18 and accompanying text (discussing a perspective that limited this power to the judicial and legislative sphere).

Recognition: As in the United States today [1955], the Bahá'í Faith is considered as one of the religions of the country, and it is known to the people and the authorities. Assembly incorporations are granted, the right to perform marriages is recognized, and its institutions are permitted to function freely as an independent religion.

Establishment (or State Religion): Like the Church of England in England, the Bahá'í Faith will be recognized and its institutions will function with the full approval of the majority of the people. People accept the teachings, realize their importance, and become followers. The Bahá'í Faith would then become a State religion, as the Christian Church in the time of Constantine was the State religion of Rome. The Bahá'í Faith has not been accepted in this way anywhere as yet.

The Bahá'í State: This will come when the Bahá'í spiritual assemblies will be the local government and the national spiritual assemblies the national government. The State will be governed by the laws, the principles, and the institutions of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Bahá'í Commonwealth: The commonwealth will follow at a time when a number of states combine to work together under the laws, the principles, and the institutions of Bahá'u'lláh.

The Bahá'í Civilization: The Bahá'í Civilization and the Golden Age of Bahá'u'lláh will be the culmination of this evolutionary process.¹⁷

This evolutionary perspective essentially asserts that although the power and authority of Bahá'í institutions need not be established immediately, there will come a time when Bahá'í institutions assume the full mantle of power. It must be noted, however, that this vision is not univocal. Within the theme of integration, the literature also contains references to the vision of the merging of religious and civil authority focused on, for example, the legislative or judicial sphere.¹⁸

In the last decade or so, a few writers have emphasized the counter-tradition that challenges this integrationist vision of a complete merging of religious and civil authority. This counter-tradition is also diverse,

¹⁷ John A. Robarts, *supra* n. 15, pp. 173–174. It should be noted that the idea of evolutionary stages does appear in a number of places in Bahá'í primary literature, and in particular, the writings of Shoghi Effendi.

¹⁸ See e.g. Keith Ransom-Kehler, "A World at Peace: Bahá'í Administration as Presented to a Group of Free Thinkers", p. 24. *The Bahá'í Magazine* 216 (1933) (stating that the "International House of Justice has only a legislative function; it alone can enact those universal laws that apply to all mankind" and that "[a]ny nation refusing to submit to its commands must be immediately suppressed by a combination of all other nations").

but the common thread is the assertion that Bahá'u'lláh intended institutional separation. In at least one contemporary work, by Juan Ricardo Cole, this institutional separation is complete; and the Universal House of Justice is seen as an internal administrative authority only, with the power of setting punishments for the religious community.¹⁹ Bahá'u'lláh's broader vision of how religious and civil institutions should interact, Cole suggests, can be illustrated through contemporary debates and categories within political philosophy. Specifically, Cole finds parallels between "communitarian" philosophies—he makes reference to Michael Sandel's notion of republicanism—and Bahá'u'lláh's intended vision, with the caveat that Bahá'u'lláh undergirded his vision with an internationalist orientation.²⁰

A distinct but nonetheless separationist view is expressed by Sen McGlinn, who has developed his approach more fully than any other writer on the subject. McGlinn concludes that Bahá'u'lláh intended some separation:

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 implying the exclusive establishment of any one confession.²¹

McGlinn reaches these conclusions starting from the thesis that the state exists and is validated in Bahá'í theology to a degree that is not seen in any other major religion, including models of Christian dualism. McGlinn contends that the Bahá'í eschatological model of the ideal society envisions a co-existence of the state and the Messiah. McGlinn further argues that the specific model of church-state relations endorsed by Bahá'u'lláh is somewhat akin to that of modern-day England. McGlinn understands this model in the following terms: "The Church of England is within the state, broadly defined, but is not in government. It is in a position to be consulted and to criticize but not to rule or coerce

¹⁹ Juan Cole has argued that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá "surely were among the first major religious figures in the region" to "embrace ... the principle of the separation of religion and state." Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millennium: The Genesis of the Bahá'í Faith in the Nineteenth Century*, p. 46 (Colum. Univ. Press, 1998).

²⁰ *idem*, p. 191.

²¹ Sen McGlinn, "A Theology of the State from the Baha'i Teachings", p. 41. *Journal Church & State*, pp. 697–724 (1999). In 2005, McGlinn self-published his master's thesis *Church and State: A Postmodern Political Theology Book One* (self-published 2005), which includes many of the conclusions reached in the 1999 article. Unless otherwise indicated, the citations in this article are taken from the 1999 article.

belief.”²² Such a model manages Bahá’u’lláh’s commitments to pluralism and freedom from coercion, the need for religion to undergird society and social life, and the need for government to seek out the expert opinion of religious leaders. Indeed, McGlinn goes on to clarify that “[t]his interdependent relationship implies that the state should support religion in general, but it will be noted that Bahá’u’lláh does not suggest that it support any particular confession, including his own.”²³

Bahá’í apologetics has also been undergoing contemporary development, and as such, a more nuanced and cautious approach to the traditional commitment to the ideal of merging of civil and religious authority has been occurring. For example, in 1995, three German Bahá’í scholars—Ulrich Gollmer, Udo Schaefer, and Nicola Towfigh—published *Desinformation als Methode* (lit. trans. Disinformation as Method),²⁴ an extensive defense in response to Francesco Ficicchia’s attack on the Bahá’í Faith, *Der Bahá’ismus: Religion der Zukunft? Geschichte, Lehre und Organisation in kritischer Anfrage* (Bahá’ism: Religion of the Future? A Critical Inquiry into its History, Teachings and Organization).²⁵

One of Ficicchia’s core allegations against the Bahá’í Faith was that it advocates political Mahdism—that Bahá’ís seek “the creation of a theocratically unified world state.”²⁶ Ficicchia undoubtedly raised this allegation in this manner to suggest that the Bahá’í community was bent on seizing power and coercing adherence to particular norms and values—an especially incendiary accusation in post-World War II Germany. Gollmer cites numerous flaws in Ficicchia’s analysis and demonstrates Ficicchia’s misunderstanding of sources and evidence, as well as of basic foundations of Bahá’í doctrine. Ficicchia’s assertion, framed as a piece of fear-mongering, is revealed as inaccurate and wrong.

At the same time, however, at the core of Ficicchia’s assertion is an inquiry into theocratic impulses in the Bahá’í Faith, and on this point the author’s response is somewhat vague. Gollmer correctly distinguishes between claims to political power and eschatological claims concerning the Kingdom of God on earth and illustrates that Ficicchia has collapsed

²² idem, p. 708.

²³ idem, p. 709.

²⁴ See Ulrich Gollmer, Udo Schaefer & Nicola Towfigh, *Making the Crooked Straight: A Contribution to Bahá’í Apologetics* (tr. Geraldine Schuckelt, George Ronald, 2000) (English).

²⁵ Francesco Ficicchia, *Religion der Zukunft? Geschichte, Lehre und Organisation in kritischer Anfrage* (Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen) (Protestant Centre Phil. Questions, Stuttgart, 1981) (German).

²⁶ Schaefer et al., *supra* n. 24, p. 423 (emphasis omitted).

eschatological claims into political power ones.²⁷ Gollmer does note, echoing the writing of Shoghi Effendi, that Bahá'ís expect that in the “Golden Age” of the Bahá'í Faith, the “internal affairs of the community and the process of world history will fuse. Religion and politics will be reconciled,”²⁸ but Gollmer offers little beyond this except to say that “every glimpse of the future that God grants to mankind is an expression of his mercy, consolation and guidance.”²⁹ The authors largely avoid the subject of theocracy per se, with Schaefer discussing it in a footnote, but only in reference to the administration of the community, not in relation to society at large.³⁰

As the above examples illustrate, between them, the integrationist and separationist traditions in the secondary literature provide arguments for almost every conceivable construction of the relationship between Bahá'í institutions and civil institutions. There is clearly dissensus on this subject in the secondary literature, in terms of both method and conclusion. There is, however, one common characteristic in the secondary literature: it is predominantly essentialist in character. To date, the literature on the subject has primarily attempted to provide answers to the question: What is the intended essential relationship between Bahá'í institutions and civil institutions? The answers provided in the secondary literature have tended to conclude that there is a Bahá'í model of “church-state” relations that can be uncovered by searching for the intention of Bahá'u'lláh. That is, the literature assumes that there is a single, particular form of government which is to predominate,³¹ and this particular form can be found within the Bahá'í writings—a definite political form to Bahá'u'lláh's eschaton of the future. These authors presume that institutional arrangements of the anticipated Kingdom of God on Earth can thus be identified and articulated.

To say that discourse concerning Bahá'í concepts of church and state has been primarily institution-focused and essentialist in nature—in the sense of seeking to identify the intended and proper institutional

²⁷ idem, pp. 425–427.

²⁸ idem, p. 439.

²⁹ ibid.

³⁰ Schaefer, in a footnote, comments as follows:

Ficicchia, who evidently does not understand my thesis, then refers to another passage of my thesis, in which I present the theocratic structural elements of the order of the Bahá'í community: “Hence, the administrative order is theocratic in character: God himself governs his people—not through a Delphic Oracle but through a revealed Book and through legal institutions that have been granted the charisma of infallibility.”

idem, p. 191.

³¹ The authors of *Making the Crooked Straight* did not clearly advocate a particular form or address the question of institutional forms.

arrangement—does not distinguish Bahá'í discourse. A preoccupation with identifying institutional patterns and dynamics has been one of the central foci of discussion about the relationship between religious and political institutions throughout the history of Christianity, most notably since the Papal Revolution of the eleventh century.³² Further, the subordination of church and state discourse to constitutional paradigms, such as in the United States, has highlighted a focus on institutional-jurisdictional demarcation. The question to be addressed, however, is whether a focus on identifying the intended pattern of relationship between religious and political institutions in the Bahá'í Faith is a helpful approach to studying Bahá'í understandings of such a relationship.

2. Questioning essentialisms: An epistemic approach to the question of church and state

As noted above, it is possible to find statements in the primary literature being used to support almost every conceivable construction of the institutional relationship between church and state in the Bahá'í Faith, and accordingly, writers have presented wildly divergent conclusions. But the issue that this divergence poses is whether within the primary literature, one can find any greater indication of a clear position than what currently appears in the secondary literature. As will be argued below, there is a coherent understanding to be found within the primary literature. This understanding, however, does not coincide with any of the positions that appear in the current secondary literature. Rather, this position denies that Bahá'u'lláh intended to advocate for any single particular model of relationship between Bahá'í institutions and civil institutions, and that, consistent with his notions of social change and the principle of unity in diversity, he envisioned a future with a multiplicity of models of institutional relationships between church and state.

As opposed to an essentialist approach, this approach might be termed epistemic. It emphasizes Bahá'u'lláh's privileging of the formation of common understandings and shared meanings, which influence and shape the appearance of particular patterns of institutional relationships. In such an epistemic vision, an open, diverse, and contingent understanding of institutional forms is evident. In practice,

³² See Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution: The Formation of the Western Legal Tradition* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1983) (discussing the evolution of the relationship between law and religion in Europe, including an excellent discussion of the Papal Revolution).

this vision would potentially justify a wide range of institutional arrangements in distinct contexts and at various stages of development—arrangements, which, in contemporary categories, might cover a wide range of separationist and integrationist possibilities. The themes below help identify the foundations, and aspects, of this epistemic vision.

A. Temporal legitimacy and divine sovereignty

The starting point for illustrating the epistemic approach is to recognize that in Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, earthly sovereignty is presented as a proper expression of divine sovereignty, while at the same time, Bahá'u'lláh does affirm the legitimacy of human governance. Bahá'u'lláh writes that "[o]ur mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men,"³³ but at the same time, "Ye are but vassals, O kings of the earth!"³⁴ The two elements of this apparent tension—temporal legitimacy and divine sovereignty—are often repeated and reinforced throughout his writings. "The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings," he writes, and "[t]hat which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts"³⁵ Also, there are statements of divine sovereignty that appear to contradict the previous statement: "[T]he precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples."³⁶

At first glance, these writings appear to affirm the principles that the Divine and divine Manifestations have complete sovereignty, though that complete sovereignty need not be expressed through a complete domination of the polity through a personage or institution imbued with divine sovereignty. Some authors, however, in writing about the question of church and state have asserted that Bahá'u'lláh's vision of divine sovereignty does not touch the realm of civil governance—and that earthly sovereignty is distinct and apart from the spiritual sovereignty of God and the Manifestations of God.³⁷ For example, McGlinn's conclusions with respect to Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (The Book of Certitude) might be summarized as follows:

³³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *supra* n. 3, p. 49.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, *supra* n. 13, p. 241.

³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *supra* n. 3, p. 19.

³⁷ The concept of the Manifestation of God is at the core of Bahá'í prophethood and central to understanding the Bahá'í concept of the relation between the Divine and human beings. See Juan R. I. Cole, "The Concept of the Manifestation in the Bahá'í Writings", p. 9. *Bahá'í Studies* 1 (1982) (discussing the Bahá'í concept of Manifestation).

1. The doctrine of “two sovereignties” in the book is Bahá’u’lláh’s engine for shifting the Bábí community from being a sect of Shi’i Islam to a new religion, which Bahá’u’lláh was on the cusp of announcing.
2. In order to effect this shift Bahá’u’lláh had to establish the sovereignty of the Báb as the Qá’im “and then to provide a justification for the separate sovereignty of the state after the eschaton.”³⁸
3. “The distinction between earthly and spiritual sovereignty is proper to God’s self.”³⁹

A review of McGlinn’s conclusions is useful to clarify aspects of the Bahá’í notion of divine sovereignty and its implications for human governance.

The Kitáb-i-Íqán was written in 1861 in response to questions posed by Hájí Mírzá Siyyid Muḥammad, a maternal uncle of the Báb.⁴⁰ In 1844, Siyyid ‘Alí-Muḥammad (1819–1850), the Báb, began making religious claims that would ultimately lead to his execution by the Iranian state.⁴¹ The Báb simultaneously claimed to be the fulfilment of Islamic prophecies, including the promised Qá’im; the bearer of a new revelation from God; and the founder of an independent religion. He also claimed to be a precursor to a future revelation.⁴² The Bábí religion grew rapidly—and was heavily persecuted. It was in Bahá’u’lláh’s capacity as a leader of the Bábí movement after the Báb’s execution that the Báb’s uncle sought answers to his questions.

Central to these questions was confusion concerning the claims of the Báb and their relationship to the claims of the Prophet Muḥammad. A major part of the Kitáb-i-Íqán is thus taken up with theological themes, including the nature of sovereignty, the station of Manifestations of God, and explanations of how human beings can attain knowledge of the Manifestation of God.

³⁸ McGlinn, “A Theology”, *supra* n. 21, p. 701.

³⁹ *idem*, p. 702.

⁴⁰ See Christopher Buck, *Symbol and Secret: Qur’án Commentary in Bahá’u’lláh’s Kitáb-i-Íqán* (Kalimát Press, 1995) (giving a detailed commentary on aspects of the Kitáb-i-Íqán).

⁴¹ There are a number of works written on the life of the Báb and the rise of his religious movement. See Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850* (Cornell Univ. Press, 1989); Hasan M. Balyuzi, *The Báb: Herald of the Day of Days* (George Ronald, 1973); ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *A Traveller’s Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Báb* (tr. E. G. Browne, Kalimát Press, 2004).

⁴² The Báb’s writings frequently refer to “*He Whom God Shall Make Manifest*” [[Man Yuzhiruhu’lláh](#)], a reference to a Manifestation of God to come after the Báb.

McGlinn, opening his analysis with a statement about Bahá'u'lláh's hermeneutics, argues that in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, Bahá'u'lláh was offering instruction about how signs of the Qá'im should be read. This is accurate, as the first half of the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* is an explication of the following statement about interpretation:

*No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth. Sanctify your souls, O ye peoples of the world, that haply ye may attain that station which God hath destined for you and enter thus the tabernacle which, according to the dispensations of Providence, hath been raised in the firmament of the Bayán.*⁴³

The second half of the book applies Bahá'u'lláh's discussion of interpretation to the specific question of the sovereignty of the Qá'im and the method of understanding his signs. Bahá'u'lláh introduces the second half of the book as an interpretation of the following verse:

*Verily He Who is the Day-star of Truth and Revealer of the Supreme Being holdeth, for all time, undisputed sovereignty over all that is in heaven and on earth, though no man be found on earth to obey Him. He verily is independent of all earthly dominion, though He be utterly destitute. Thus We reveal unto thee the mysteries of the Cause of God, and bestow upon thee the gems of divine wisdom, that haply thou mayest soar on the wings of renunciation to those heights that are veiled from the eyes of men.*⁴⁴

McGlinn further suggests that Bahá'u'lláh's purpose is to highlight that the question of the sovereignty of the Qá'im (in this context, the Báb) cannot be separated from the question of the sovereignty of the Prophets generally.⁴⁵ This is a limited rendering of Bahá'u'lláh's purpose, but it does resonate with the text and the general opinion of commentators. In context, the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* must be read as an apologetic defense of the Báb, both in response to the doubts of the Báb's maternal uncle as well as to the general slander that had been levelled at the Báb and his followers both during his lifetime and after his execution. Bahá'u'lláh is thus interested in standards and methods of interpretation of revelation and the signs of the future they contain. His method of analysis on this point is to absolutely distinguish the category of Manifestation of God from the category of human being, whether

⁴³ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude*, p. 3 (2nd ed., Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1950).

⁴⁴ *idem*, p. 97.

⁴⁵ McGlinn, "A Theology", *supra* n. 21, p. 701.

learned or not. Only Manifestations of God can uncover the hidden and real meanings of the words of God, and, as such, the basis for all inquiries into truth must be conducted through the Manifestation or his revelation.⁴⁶ What all human beings do possess is the capacity, as stated in the opening paragraph of the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, to recognize and obey God.⁴⁷

As Nader Saiedi has explained, this distinction between the Manifestation of God and humans extends dynamically throughout history through Bahá'u'lláh's reading of the principle of the unity of God. While the unity of God has long stood for the rejection of idol worship, Bahá'u'lláh extends it to require "recognizing the Will of God beyond particular instances of that Will."⁴⁸ In other words, this is an expression of the Bahá'í concept of progressive revelation—or the idea that divine revelation is both progressive and relative. Revelation, in Bahá'í thought, is a unitary but historically and contextually bound phenomenon: God has intervened in human history periodically and continually through Manifestations of God who bring a message in the form of revelation. Each of these instances of revelation has absolute legitimacy and authority as the word of God.⁴⁹ Revelations differ in the mode of expression, emphasis, structure, and details, depending upon the period of history and context into which the revelation is born. Revelation is thus in a reflexive relationship with history. Just as revelation demands and motivates particular human actions and movements, the course of human history comes to require and necessitate new revelations. The particular expression of the will of God in the revelation of the Báb, while specific, is also an expression of the same will that produced the Qur'án. To reject the Báb, by citing the words of the Qur'án or any other scripture, is thus invalid and a form of idol worship.

Within the interpretation of these references, Bahá'u'lláh is laying the basis for the claim of the complete sovereignty of the Manifestations of God, and indeed of himself. The Christian rejection of Muḥammad and the Muslim rejection of the Báb are rooted in the clinging to literal traditions and expectations of prophecy that are the accretions of time and human learning, as well as rooted in the failure to accept that the only measurable standard of the Messiah or the Promised One is the

⁴⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, *supra* n. 13, at 60–66.

⁴⁷ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *supra* n. 3, p. 19.

⁴⁸ Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 144–145, 154 (Univ. Press Maryland, 2000).

⁴⁹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *supra* n. 43, pp. 50–56.

person of the Manifestation himself and the revelation he brings.⁵⁰

While McGlinn's analysis appears consistent with these general points concerning divine sovereignty, on the issue of earthly sovereignty, his argument becomes unclear and in some respects questionable. It is worth quoting McGlinn's paragraphs in full:

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 sovereign is the spiritual ascendancy ... which in due time revealeth itself to the world

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 that 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, to call forth sacrifices, and to create a new form of human community. While clearly differentiated from worldly dominion, and superior inasmuch as it is long-lasting, Baha'u'llah does not say that it overrules 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

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. We will return to this point in "A Speculative Theology".⁵¹

This argument is not well supported. McGlinn implies that the first quotation he cites suggests that the Qa'im is not interested in earthly

⁵⁰ idem, p. 123–124.

⁵¹ McGlinn, "A Theology", *supra* n. 21, p. 702.

sovereignty. There is an argument that the quotation implies the opposite. Allowing for the sovereignty of the Qá'im "whether or not He appear to the world clothed in the majesty of earthly dominion" merely suggests that earthly sovereignty is a possible but not necessary criterion for his appearance. The fact that earthly sovereignty is a viable expression of the spiritual sovereignty of the Qá'im is further supported in the next sentence of the excerpt from the Kitáb-i-Íqán, which McGlinn does not quote:

*Furthermore, by sovereignty is meant the all-encompassing, all-pervading power which is inherently exercised by the Qá'im whether or not He appear to the world clothed in the majesty of earthly dominion. **This is solely dependent upon the will and pleasure of the Qá'im Himself.***⁵²

This acceptance that the Qá'im might properly exercise earthly sovereignty fits with the general theory of sovereignty that Bahá'u'lláh develops in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Bahá'u'lláh's central point is that the sovereignty of the Manifestation of God (including the Qá'im) is absolute and self-defining. Manifestations have "all-compelling power" and are "invested with invincible sovereignty."⁵³ Further, "[t]his sovereignty ... is not the sovereignty which the minds of men have falsely imagined."⁵⁴ This sovereignty can only be defined by God and the Manifestations, because it is possessed by Manifestations in their character of embodying the attributes of God.

Bahá'u'lláh writes in reference to the Manifestations that "each and every one of them [has] been endowed with all the attributes of God, such as sovereignty, dominion, and the like, even though to outward seeming they be shorn of all earthly majesty."⁵⁵ Saiedi summarizes the relationship between the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of the Manifestations in the following terms:

The unconditional sovereignty of God implies that divine revelation cannot be bound by the limited categories and interpretations of the human mind. So all ordinary presuppositions about the meanings of the words of God and the holy traditions must be discarded, and reliance on such arbitrary human constructions and standards amounts to "chaining up the hand of God" and, in fact, denying divine sovereignty

⁵² Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *supra* n. 43, p. 107 (emphasis added).

⁵³ *idem*, p. 97.

⁵⁴ *idem*, p. 106.

⁵⁵ *idem*, p. 104.

Bahá'u'lláh also affirms the sovereignty of the Prophets through the fundamental concept of manifestation theology. The Prophets are all Manifestations of the attributes of God. Their very existence is the supreme manifestation of the divine attribute of sovereignty. Therefore, the being of the Prophet is itself absolute sovereign over all things⁵⁶

Further, Saiedi writes:

At the level of creation, the world has come into existence through the Word of God, which is the essence of the Manifestations of God. The existence of all things depends on them since it is through them that all things have been created. This is absolute, unconditional, and essential dominion and sovereignty. This dominion is never alienated from the Manifestations of God because the entire creation would cease to exist if divine grace and effulgence were to stop for one moment⁵⁷

In this vision of all-encompassing sovereignty, whether or not the Qá'im holds earthly sovereignty is beside the point. While human beings may expect the Qá'im to exert earthly sovereignty in his lifetime, it is completely up to the Qá'im whether or not he will. As Gollmer comments, "[t]he fact that the Qá'im—and most previous Manifestations—are, at least initially, not in possession of any earthly power, is regarded as a test for mankind."⁵⁸ Further,

unrestricted power is the prerogative of God and his manifestations alone: "He doeth what He pleaseth." It is up to the manifestations themselves how they employ the secular and spiritual powers bestowed upon them by God, and how they transfer these powers to the respective institutions appointed to succeed them.⁵⁹

Earthly sovereignty is within the sovereignty of the Qá'im, as is the choice whether or not to exert it—the operative principle being the absolute sovereignty of God and the Manifestations. For example, in relation to law, Bahá'u'lláh writes:

Were He to decree as lawful the thing which from time immemorial had been forbidden, and forbid that which had, at all times, been regarded as lawful, to none is given the right to question His authority. Whoso will hesitate, though it be for less

⁵⁶ Saiedi, *Logos*, *supra* n. 48, p. 133.

⁵⁷ *idem*, p. 157.

⁵⁸ Schaefer et al., *supra* n. 24, pp. 592–593.

⁵⁹ *idem*, p. 701.

*than a moment, should be regarded as a transgressor.*⁶⁰

Bahá'u'lláh makes this clear in his discussion of the treatment of Muḥammad. After recounting how Muḥammad was debased in his lifetime, Bahá'u'lláh celebrates how many of the governments of the world have become identified with Muḥammad and Islam. Bahá'u'lláh notes that

*[e]ven those Kings of the earth who have refused to embrace His Faith and to put off the garment of unbelief, none the less confess and acknowledge the greatness and overpowering majesty of that Day-star of loving kindness.*⁶¹

He then goes to explicitly state that the Qá'im and Manifestations do have earthly sovereignty:

*Such is His earthly sovereignty, the evidences of which thou dost on every side behold. This sovereignty must needs be revealed and established either in the lifetime of every Manifestation of God or after His ascension unto His true habitation in the realms above. What thou dost witness today is but a confirmation of this truth. That spiritual ascendancy, however, which is primarily intended, resideth within, and revolveth around Them from eternity even unto eternity. It can never for a moment be divorced from Them. Its dominion hath encompassed all that is in heaven and on earth.*⁶²

McGlinn's argument that a distinction between spiritual and earthly sovereignty is proper to God's self and that an implication of this is that Manifestations do not properly exert an earthly sovereignty is weak. It is clear in Bahá'í thought that the sovereignty of the Manifestations is all-encompassing, although earthly sovereignty is often not exercised by the Manifestation himself in his lifetime, but will come to be expressed later. In the second quotation cited by McGlinn, Bahá'u'lláh is refuting the traditional interpretations of the coming of the Qá'im that demand his earthly sovereignty to be expressed through his person. At the same time, Bahá'u'lláh is defining a type of earthly sovereignty that he deems inappropriate—one characterized by coercion and force. Further, Bahá'u'lláh is confirming that earthly sovereignty is not the measure or standard for establishing the sovereignty of a Manifestation; nor are earthly sovereignty and spiritual sovereignty wholly distinct. Thus, earthly sovereignty is a valid expression of the spiritual sovereignty of Manifestations, but its absence at a particular time is not proof of an

⁶⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *supra* n. 3, p. 77.

⁶¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *supra* n. 43, p. 110.

⁶² *idem*, p. 110–111.

invalid claim to being a Manifestation (or the Qá'im in the specific case of the Báb).

B. Interaction of religion and politics

Bahá'u'lláh's affirmation of God's earthly sovereignty, as expressed through his Manifestations, is reflected in the general proposition expressed in the writings of the Bahá'í Faith that religion and politics can and should inform and interact with one another.

The Bahá'í teachings envision religion as essential to all aspects of human life, including public life. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes that

*[I]t is certain that man's highest distinction is to be lowly before and obedient to his God; that his greatest glory, his most exalted rank and honour, depend on his close observance of the Divine commands and prohibitions. Religion is the light of the world, and the progress, achievement, and happiness of man result from obedience to the laws set down in the holy Books. Briefly, it is demonstrable that in this life, both outwardly and inwardly the mightiest of structures, the most solidly established, the most enduring, standing guard over the world, assuring both the spiritual and the material perfections of mankind, and protecting the happiness and the civilization of society—is religion.*⁶³

Further, 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

*It is certain that the greatest of instrumentalities for achieving the advancement and the glory of man, the supreme agency for the enlightenment and the redemption of the world, is love and fellowship and unity among all the members of the human race. Nothing can be effected in the world, not even conceivably, without unity and agreement, and the perfect means for engendering fellowship and union is true religion.*⁶⁴

This emphasis on the essentiality of religion is echoed in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that the Bahá'í Faith "*embraceth all spiritual and temporal matters.*"⁶⁵

This affirmation of the fundamental role of religion does not answer the question of the proper relationship between religious and civil institutions—and whether institutional integration is required by the Bahá'í writings. There are other ways besides institutional integration in which religion and politics may interact. For example, the integration

⁶³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 71–72 (tr. Marzieh Gail, Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1957).

⁶⁴ *idem*, p. 73.

⁶⁵ Ltr. from the Universal House of Justice, *supra* n. 11.

may be cultural and social—meaning that religion is in the public sphere, an active force within public discourse, but religious and civil political institutions remain distinct from one another. Further, there are many possible forms and structures where religious and political institutions have varying degrees of formal (and informal) relationships with one another, but remain legally and politically distinct entities. Through a review of some Bahá'í primary literature, it is argued that the Bahá'í teachings do not definitively insist on any particular model of institutional interaction as essential and correct.

The starting point for analysis of the possible public role of Bahá'í institutions is to review the nature, structure, and role of the Universal House of Justice. It is important at the outset to review and consider the following statement of Bahá'u'lláh concerning the Universal House of Justice:

This passage, now written by the Pen of Glory, is accounted as part of the Most Holy Book: The men of God's House of Justice have been charged with the affairs of the people. They, in truth, are the Trustees of God among His servants and the daysprings of authority in His countries.

O people of God! That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world. Inasmuch as for each day there is a new problem and for every problem an expedient solution, such affairs should be referred to the House of Justice that the members thereof may act according to the needs and requirements of the time. They that, for the sake of God, arise to serve His Cause, are the recipients of divine inspiration from the unseen Kingdom. It is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them. All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book.⁶⁶

The primary focus of debate in this passage is the statement that “*all matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice.*”⁶⁷ This translation remains the standard one used within the Bahá'í community and is often used to support the apologetic assertion that the Universal House of Justice is intended to be the future governing institution for the entire world. In contrast to the predominant approach, Cole has argued that it has been mistranslated, particularly, the phrase *umúr-i-*

⁶⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, supra n. 3, p. 91.

⁶⁷ The original words of this phrase are “*umúr-i-siyásiyyih kull rájí ast bíh bayt-i-'adl*”.

siyásiyyih.^[*] 68 Cole argues that this phrase should be translated as referring to leadership and setting punishments, as opposed to the political role implied in the use of the term *state*.⁶⁹

Cole's interpretation, however, does not account for the reality that over the course of hundreds of years, *siyása* ["administration, management; policy"] became the term for politics in all Middle Eastern languages. As early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries, one finds derivations of *siyása* with significant political connotations.⁷⁰

The question remains, however, what are the implications of this statement? The statement could imply a vision of the Universal House of Justice as the sole religious and civil authority. But it can also be read in other ways, as saying, for example, that all political (state) matters impacting the community should be addressed by the Universal House of Justice. A review of some of the key writings concerning the Universal House of Justice demonstrates that the institution is certainly discussed and structured like a contemporary political legislative institution. At the same time, however, there are not explicit statements about the Universal House of Justice and civil institutions which necessitate a fully integrationist conclusion.

In writing that "acts of worship" must be obeyed according to the teachings of scripture, Bahá'u'lláh removes them from the purview of the House of Justice, and as such reforms the classical Islamic scheme. The realm of worship (*'ibádat*) is historically drawn within Islamic law as distinct from the realms of societal relations (*mu'ámalát*, [sing. *mu'ámalat(t)*]) and politics (*síyása*).⁷¹ In the classical Sunni Islamic theory, the methods and rules developed by the ulama control the realms of *'ibádat* and *mu'ámalát*, thereby lending significant public power to the clerics. Over time the ulama also developed theoretical justifications for roles in the realm of *siyása*, though in practice, the ruler exercised some legal (legislative) power in the realm of *siyása*.

[*] *Siyásí*, fem. *siyásiya*[h or t], pl. *siyásiyún*, *sása*: political; diplomatic;—pl. politician; diplomat, statesman. Pers. fem. also *siyásiyyih*.

⁶⁸ Cole, *Modernity*, *supra* n. 19, pp. 96–97.

⁶⁹ *ibid*.

⁷⁰ In this period, the Sunni Islamic jurists intensified their attention to the public and constitutional realm. While *uṣūl al-fiqh* (the sources and science of law as developed by the ulama [*'alim*, pl. *'ulamá'* (Pers. *'ulamá'*)] spoke volumes about private law, it had less to say on public power and authority until scholars such as al-Máwardí (972–1058) set out to reflect on public law and power and incorporate it into the realm of *fiqh* as developed by the ulama. Therefore, we see the emergence of the use of the term *siyása*, combined with *sharí'ah*, to indicate the extension of *sharí'ah* and *fiqh* into the political (e.g., *siyása*) realm.

⁷¹ See Noel J. Coulson, *A History of Islamic Law* (Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1964) (giving a classical introduction to the history and evolution of Islamic law, including a good discussion of the terminology and themes mentioned in this article).

Bahá'u'lláh's scheme maintains a distinction between *'ibádat*, *mu'ámalát*, and *siyása* but reconfigures the power arrangements. There is only one legal authority, the Universal House of Justice, and it is restricted from operating in the realm of *'ibádat*.⁷² The Universal House of Justice is also a form of legal actor that operates outside of the parameters of the classical Islamic legal theory. In particular, the Universal House of Justice has an explicit grant of legislative powers.⁷³ As well, there is no public or legal role for a clerical class in this scheme, and no authority over the sacramental aspects of religious life.⁷⁴

It is also important to emphasise other ways that the Universal House of Justice does not represent an institutionalized and rationalized clerical authority mirroring the ulama [*'ulamá'*] of Islam. In the classical Islamic legal theory, no authority was granted to any institution or class of individuals to pass generally binding legislation. In pursuit of the need to act according to divine sanction in all aspects of life, the mechanism for identifying the divine law applicable in a particular situation was to be done through *ijtihád*.⁷⁵ A new engagement with the sources (*uṣúl*) of law through *ijtihád* was to occur every time a legal question arose. Within the strivings of conscience entailed in *ijtihád*, it was believed, the most pristine and sanctified legal rule applicable to a situation could be discovered.⁷⁶ Frank Vogel refers to law-making through *ijtihád* as a “microcosmic” and “inner-directed” paradigm of “instance-law”.⁷⁷

Within such a legal methodology, an act of legislation is inferior to and at odds with the method of *ijtihád* itself. To this degree, however, the ideal theory is also anarchic and impractical—with the expected historical consequence of a great diversity of laws (typically organized into “schools”); the emergence of schemes for general law-making; and the balancing of power between the learned (ulama) and the rulers (Caliph, Sultan, King).⁷⁸ This balance was always a compromise, however, viewed to some degree as a deviation from the ideal method of *ijtihád*.

In contrast to this Islamic scheme, it is crucial to recognize the Universal House of Justice as a democratic institution that passes legislation through a non-intentionalist paradigm. Quite explicitly, the

⁷² Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, *supra* n. 12, pp. 128–129.

⁷³ Because the Universal House of Justice is specifically empowered to legislate general laws, it is distinguished from institutions in classical Islamic legal theory.

⁷⁴ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets*, *supra* n. 12, pp. 128–129.

⁷⁵ Coulson, *supra* n. 71.

⁷⁶ *idem*.

⁷⁷ Frank Vogel, *Islamic Law and Legal System: Studies of Saudi Arabia*, p. 26 (Brill 2000).

⁷⁸ Coulson, *supra* n. 71.

Universal House of Justice is instructed to pass legislation based on the exigencies of the time, not on the principles within the holy scripture where specific laws for all circumstances for all time can be found. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the rationale of the Universal House of Justice in a comparison and distinction with the traditional legal role of the ulama:

Those matters of major importance which constitute the foundation of the Law of God are explicitly recorded in the Text, but subsidiary laws are left to the House of Justice. The wisdom of this is that the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place. Therefore the House of Justice will take action accordingly

Briefly, this is the wisdom of referring the laws of society to the House of Justice. In the religion of Islám, similarly, not every ordinance was explicitly revealed; nay not a tenth part of a tenth part was included in the Text; although all matters of major importance were specifically referred to, there were undoubtedly thousands of laws which were unspecified. These were devised by the divines of a later age according to the laws of Islamic jurisprudence, and individual divines made conflicting deductions from the original revealed ordinances. All these were enforced. Today this process of deduction is the right of the body of the House of Justice, and the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice.⁷⁹

‘Abdul-Bahá further states that “[u]nto [the Universal House of Justice] all things must be referred. It enacteth all ordinances and regulations that are not to be found in the explicit Holy Text”;⁸⁰ that “unto the Most Holy Book every one must turn and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice”;⁸¹ and whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. And inasmuch as this House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same.⁸²

⁷⁹ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *supra* n. 3, pp. 4–5 (quoting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the Introduction). Bahá’u’lláh made it explicit that the laws he described in his writings cannot be repealed or altered by the Universal House of Justice. They can only be altered by a future Manifestation of God. These laws number approximately 95. As a general principle, however, these laws require an act of implementation by the Universal House of Justice to become operative.

⁸⁰ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Will*, *supra* n. 6, p. 14.

⁸¹ *idem*, p. 19.

⁸² *idem*, p. 20.

It seems clear that the legal power (*tashrī'*) granted to the Universal House of Justice is a legislative one where an institution has the power to enact new laws. Only such a reading can adequately account for a power such as repeal.

This construction of the Universal House of Justice certainly appears to be analogous to a political legislative institution. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, notes this when he writes:

*This House of Justice enacteth the laws and the government enforceth them. The legislative body must reinforce the executive, the executive must aid and assist the legislative body so that through the close union and harmony of these two forces, the foundation of fairness and justice may become firm and strong, that all the regions of the world may become even as Paradise itself.*⁸³

Implied in this text is a connection between the legislative role of the Universal House of Justice and actions by world governments generally. The scope of its legislative authority is defined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the following expansive terms:

*It is incumbent upon these members (of the Universal House of Justice) to gather in a certain place and deliberate upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book. Whatsoever they decide has the same effect as the Text itself. And inasmuch as this House of Justice hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same. Thus for example, the House of Justice enacteth today a certain law and enforceth it, and a hundred years hence, circumstances having profoundly changed and the conditions having altered, another House of Justice will then have power, according to the exigencies of the time, to alter that law. This it can do because that law formeth no part of the Divine Explicit Text. The House of Justice is both the initiator and the abrogator of its own laws.*⁸⁴

Finally, it is important to note that the Universal House of Justice is described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi as possessing "conferred infallibility" (*al-Iṣma aṣ-ṣifátiya*).⁸⁵ The implication of this claim is that the Universal House of Justice is believed to be free from error or not

⁸³ idem, p. 14–15.

⁸⁴ idem, p. 20.

⁸⁵ See Udo Schaefer, "Infallible Institutions?", 9 *Bahá'í Studies Review*, pp. 17–45 (1999/2000) (available at https://bahai-library.com/schaefer_infallible_institutions) (discussing the infallibility in the Bahá'í Faith).

liable to errors in judgment. This infallibility rests on the institution and not on its members, and, as such, there are no implications of sinlessness or immaculateness attached to this claim.⁸⁶ There exists some discussion in the secondary literature about whether this claim of infallibility applies to all decisions and actions of the Universal House of Justice, but it is generally accepted that it attaches to their legislative enactments.⁸⁷ While this does not address the question of the relationship between church and state per se, the belief in infallibility clarifies the theocratic nature of the Bahá'í model of administration in the sense that it implicates the Divine in Bahá'í law-making.

What can we conclude from these writings about the structure and nature of the Universal House of Justice? Collectively, these various aspects of the Universal House of Justice appear to affirm its character as a legislative institution, distinct from the traditions of the ulama and reflecting notions of political power indicative of the realm of *siyása* that imply a role beyond solely administering the life of the religious community. This does not, however, tell us the substance of what the relationship between church and state—or more specifically the relationship between the Universal House of Justice and civil governments—will look like in Bahá'í terms. It already appears that there is enough evidence to question firm separationist positions. However, this does not lead necessarily to the fully integrationist conclusion.⁸⁸

The following statements written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, and considered as authoritative by the religious community, further make it clear that a public role is anticipated for Bahá'í institutions, while not providing specificity on actual institutional arrangements or foreclosing all arguments for some forms of institutional separation:

In the light of these words, it seems fully evident that the way to approach this instruction is in realizing the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh as an ever-growing organism destined to become something new and greater than any of the revealed religions of the past. Whereas former Faiths inspired hearts and illumined souls, they eventuated in formal religions with an ecclesiastical organization, creeds, rituals and churches, while the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, likewise renewing man's spiritual life, will gradually produce the institutions of an ordered society, fulfilling not merely the function

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

⁸⁷ For example, William S. Hatcher has argued for a broader scope of the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice, than, for example, Schaefer does. See William S. Hatcher, "Reflections on Infallibility" (*Journal Bahá'í Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1–4, Dec. 2007, pp. 85–100). See https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265040655_Reflections_on_Infallibility.

⁸⁸ See e.g. *supra* nn. 15–20 and accompanying text.

of the churches of the past but also the function of the civil state. By this manifestation of the Divine Will in a higher degree than in former ages, humanity will emerge from that immature civilization in which [C]hurch and [S]tate are separate and competitive institutions, and partake of a true civilization in which spiritual and social principles are at last reconciled as two aspects of one and the same Truth.⁸⁹

* * *

Regarding the question raised in your letter, Shoghi Effendi believes that for the present the Movement, whether in the East or the West, should be dissociated entirely from politics. This was the explicit injunction of 'Abdu'l-Bahá Eventually, however, as you have rightly conceived it, the Movement will, as soon as it is fully developed and recognized, embrace both religious and political issues. In fact Bahá'u'lláh clearly states that affairs of state as well as religious questions are to be referred to the House of Justice into which the Assemblies of the Bahá'ís will eventually evolve.⁹⁰

The Bahá'ís will be called upon to assume the reins of government when they will come to constitute the majority of the population in a given country, and even then their participation in political affairs is bound to be limited in scope unless they obtain a similar majority in some other countries as well.⁹¹

* * *

The Bahá'ís must remain non-partisan in all political affairs. In the distant future, however, when the majority of a country have become Bahá'ís then it will lead to the establishment of a Bahá'í State.⁹²

Shoghi Effendi himself wrote the following:

Not only will the present day Spiritual Assemblies be styled differently in future, but they will be enabled also to add to their present functions those powers, duties, and prerogatives necessitated by the recognition of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, not merely as one of the recognized religious systems of the world, but as the State Religion of an independent and Sovereign Power. And as the Bahá'í Faith permeates the masses of the peoples of

⁸⁹ Ltr. from the Universal House of Justice to anonymous (27 Apr. 1995), <http://bahai-library.com/uhj/theocracy.html> (last accessed 21 May 2021).

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

⁹² *ibid.*

East and West, and its truth is embraced by the majority of the peoples of a number of the Sovereign States of the world, will the Universal House of Justice attain the plenitude of its power, and exercise, as the supreme organ of the Bahá'í Commonwealth, all the rights, the duties, and responsibilities incumbent upon the world's future super-state.⁹³

* * *

This present Crusade, on the threshold of which we now stand, will, moreover, by virtue of the dynamic forces it will release and its wide repercussions over the entire surface of the globe, contribute effectually to the acceleration of yet another process of tremendous significance which will carry the steadily evolving Faith of Bahá'u'lláh through its present stages of obscurity, of repression, of emancipation and of recognition—stages one or another of which Bahá'í national communities in various parts of the world now find themselves in—to the stage of establishment, the stage at which the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh will be recognized by the civil authorities as the state religion, similar to that which Christianity entered in the years following the death of the Emperor Constantine, a stage which must later be followed by the emergence of the Bahá'í state itself, functioning, in all religious and civil matters, in strict accordance with the laws and ordinances of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Most Holy, the Mother Book of the Bahá'í Revelation, a stage which, in the fullness of time, will culminate in the establishment of the World Bahá'í Commonwealth, functioning in the plenitude of its powers, and which will signalize the long awaited advent of the Christ promised Kingdom of God on earth—the Kingdom of Bahá'u'lláh mirroring however faintly upon this humble handful of dust the glories of the Abhá Kingdom.⁹⁴

The Universal House of Justice has described Shoghi Effendi's explanation of the "future Bahá'í World Commonwealth" as one "that will unite spiritual and civil authority" and rejects the assertion that the "modern political concept of 'separation of church and state' is somehow one that Bahá'u'lláh intended as a basic principle of the World Order He has founded."⁹⁵

⁹³ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, *supra* n. 7, pp. 6–7.

⁹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World, 1950–1957*, p. 155 (Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1971).

⁹⁵ Ltr. of the Universal House of Justice to all National Spiritual Assemblies (7 Apr. 1999). [*Messages from the Universal House of Justice 1986–2001*, para. 296.7, p. 662.]

Given the above explications, one is hard pressed to see how some scholars could have definitively concluded that the essential Bahá'í view is of a form of institutional separation—whether complete separation as in the case of Cole, or even the English model advocated by McGlinn. Only through failure to fully incorporate certain authoritative primary sources can such a conclusion be reached. McGlinn demonstrates such an omission in his 1998 article when he writes inaccurately that “Shoghi Effendi’s own writings contain little that illuminates the church-state question” and that beyond stating definitely that the Bahá'ís must never “allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries”, and vigorously emphasizing the duty of obedience of government, he says nothing on the church-state issue.⁹⁶

Further, McGlinn not only dismisses the possibility of an integrationist endpoint argued for in much of the secondary literature on the subject but also insists that the notion the Bahá'í teachings on the subject might affirm a developmental or evolutionary approach is wrong.⁹⁷ Labelling such approaches “dispensationalist”, McGlinn, as discussed earlier, argues that a particular separationist form of church-state relations is identified as intended, and as such that an evolutionary approach would require acceptance of change of fundamental teachings of the Bahá'í Faith over time.⁹⁸ In order to dismiss the dispensationalist approach, McGlinn classifies authoritative statements from the primary literature as being about “historical process” and not statements reflecting a fundamental teaching of the religion. For example, McGlinn dismisses the statements of Shoghi Effendi—such as those quoted above speaking of stages of “establishment” and formation of a “Bahá'í state”—as a reference to “historical change” and not support for a dispensationalist view.⁹⁹

In such an approach, McGlinn appears guilty of a similar error he suggests is made by advocates of dispensationalism. McGlinn explains away apparently integrationist statements as only about “historical change” to help validate his separationist starting point).¹⁰⁰ This is similar to what he accuses the dispensationalists of—categorizing

⁹⁶ McGlinn, “A Theology”, *supra* n. 21, p. 713.

⁹⁷ Sen McGlinn, “Theocratic Assumptions in Bahá'í Literature”, in *Reason and Revelation: New Directions in Bahá'í Thought*, pp. 39–802 (Seena Fazel & John Danesh eds., Kalimát Press, 2002).

⁹⁸ *idem*, p. 59–64.

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

certain primary literature as referring to “stages” to explain away apparently separationist statements and affirm an integrationist endpoint. As will be further explored later, in an epistemic approach the necessity and logic of change—which reflects fundamental principles of the Bahá’í Faith—is emphasized over the goal of identifying a particular and essential institutional endpoint, whether it be integrationist or separationist.

But still one must be cautious in concluding from these statements a firm commitment in the primary literature to any essential and specific model of church-state relations. Questions of the establishment of religion are not entirely analogous to the issue of the relationship between religious and civil institutions, and certainly not to the question of theocracy. Moreover, there are many models for what “establishment” and formation of a “Bahá’í state” might mean. Further, as illustrated earlier, there are also statements in the primary literature that can be understood to suggest a more separationist view.¹⁰¹ Statements of Shoghi Effendi seem to suggest a future with distinct national civil institutions.¹⁰² It must also be noted that there is undeniably a firm commitment to democracy, human rights, and protection of minorities in the primary literature. Little has been offered in secondary literature to justify how an integrationist vision can be reconciled with these principles.

Given all of the above, it appears that there is no definitive evidence in the primary literature that insists on firm conclusions about an essential institutional model of church-state relations. In this respect, the majority of the secondary literature—whether it advocates for an

¹⁰¹ See *supra* text accompanying nn. 10–14. A number of authors, including Cole and McGlenn, place reliance on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih* (Treatise on Politics) to support separationist readings of the primary literature. The Universal House of Justice responded to this interpretation of the treatise by stating that it does not represent a commentary on the appropriate relationship between Bahá’í and civil institutions:

You have referred also to a number of extracts from *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*, in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the damaging effects of the interference of religious teachers in political affairs. The inapplicability of these passages to the future role of the democratically elected Houses of Justice is clarified by study of the Bahá’í Writings on the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. (Ltr. from the Universal House of Justice, *supra* n. 11. See https://bahai-library.com/uhj_takfir, para. 19)

To date, there has not been an authorized translation of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*. The Universal House of Justice has provided a translation of some excerpts. *ibid.* A few scholars have produced their own translation of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*. For example, McGlenn provides his translation under the chosen title *Sermon on the Art of Governance*. McGlenn, *Church and State*, *supra* n. 21, pp. 379–401.

¹⁰² For example, Shoghi Effendi in describing the emergence of a world “Super-State”, refers to it in the context of a “Commonwealth of all the nations of the world” including “federated representatives” and “federated units”. Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, *supra* n. 7, pp. 40–41.

integrationist or a separationist approach—is guilty of the same error. Nowhere do Bahá'í writings spell out in detail how Bahá'í and civil institutions are expected to interact structurally or describe the jurisdictional lines, if any, that will be drawn between them. The evidence for the complete disappearance of secular civil institutions is inconclusive, as is the evidence for McGlinn's proposed English model. While religion is unequivocally anticipated as having a role in public life, and there are clear statements envisioning a legitimate role for Bahá'í institutions in public affairs, even the uniting of spiritual and civil authority in the distant world commonwealth, a specific and definitive institutional role is not prescribed in any absolute sense. As will be argued in the next section, the reason for this absence of specificity is that core Bahá'í teachings of social maturation and unity necessitate an open and contingent approach to such social forms of the future.

C. Maturation and unity

Much secondary literature, as noted earlier, has not been content to leave uncertainty to this future institutional role. By going further, however, such literature lapses into essentialist positions, which are irreconcilable with core teachings of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, such as those on social maturation and unity.

The Bahá'í writings repeatedly employ developmental metaphors to describe the collective life of humanity. The lens for analyzing the current conditions of political and social life is through the category of social maturation. For example, in a typical statement of this idea by the Universal House of Justice, the Bahá'í Faith views

[t]he human race, as a distinct, organic unit, [which] has passed through evolutionary stages analogous to the stages of infancy and childhood in the lives of its individual members, and is now in the culminating period of its turbulent adolescence approaching its long-awaited coming of age.¹⁰³

This vision of social maturation rests upon the idea of unity, which is the axis of Bahá'í ontology. In the Bahá'í paradigm, unity is an ontological principle, the defining characteristic of the nature of reality. As one scholar summarizes:

According to the Bahá'í view, the nature of reality is ultimately a unity, in contrast to a view that would postulate a multiplicity of

¹⁰³ Ltr. from the Universal House of Justice to the peoples of the world (Oct. 1985). This letter has been widely published as Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace* (Assn. Bahá'í Studies, 1985) (available at <https://www.bahai.org/documents/the-universal-house-of-justice/promise-world-peace>).

differing or incommensurate realities. The nature of truth, according to the Bahá'í writings, is thus fundamentally unitary and not pluralistic. In a talk delivered in New York City in December of 1912, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that "*oneness is truth and truth is oneness which does not admit of plurality.*" At a talk in Paris early that year, 'Abdu'l-Bahá admits that "*Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one.*"¹⁰⁴

This ontology argues that humanity's collective life on this planet is in the process of evolving to reflect more fully the reality of unity in diversity so as to maximize its potential for social order and organization. The social life of humanity has become more complex and integrated, and thus humanity must develop its ability to organize in patterns of unity in diversity. Society, however, is not static. It is a human construct. It is the product of human imagination, devotion, and will. This means that human society can and should change, but it does not mean that the form society should take is completely open and anarchic. Social forms, including legal and political institutions, will endure and are most suited to meet the needs of human beings when they are constructed and operate according to the principle of unity. In fact, the Bahá'í writings argue that a general pattern in the history of the organization of human society illustrates an awareness of the need to construct enlarging patterns of unity:

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successively attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal towards which a harassed humanity is striving.¹⁰⁵

It is important to stress how essential the concept of diversity is to the Bahá'í notion of unity. The Bahá'í writings identify true unity as encompassing diversity. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses the following analogy to describe the relationship between unity and diversity:

As difference in degree of capacity exists among human souls, as difference in capability is found, therefore, individualities will differ one from another. But in reality this is a reason for unity and not for discord and enmity. If the flowers of a garden were all of one colour, the effect would be monotonous to the eye; but if the colours are variegated, it is most pleasing and wonderful. The

¹⁰⁴ Dann J. May, "The Bahá'í Principle of Religious Unity and the Challenge of Radical Pluralism", (unpublished master's thesis in Interdisciplinary Studies, Univ. North Texas 1993), https://bahai-library.com/may_principle_religious_unity (last accessed 21 May 2021). ['Abdu'l-Bahá cited from *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 454 and *Paris Talks*, p. 53.]

¹⁰⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, *supra* n. 7, p. 202.

*difference in adornment of colour and capacity of reflection among the flowers gives the garden its beauty and charm. Therefore, although we are of different individualities, ... let us strive like flowers of the same divine garden to live together in harmony. Even though each soul has its own individual perfume and colour, all are reflecting the same light, all contributing fragrance to the same breeze which blows through the garden, all continuing to grow in complete harmony and accord.*¹⁰⁶

Inherent within and inseparable from this vision of unity are the well-known Bahá'í commitments to gender and racial equality[,] and social justice that are essential for the creation of true unity in diversity.

According to such a view of reality, the mission and challenge of social forms is not to find patterns of harmony amongst differences—in other words, not merely to find patterns of harmonious co-existence—but, in recognizing the reality of unity, to increasingly discover patterns of integration that express the fundamental unity of diverse entities in ever more complex and fundamental ways. Indeed, the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth is a process of increasingly articulating underlying realities, such as unity, and embodying these realities in the patterns of social and personal life we create:

“The kingdom of peace, salvation, uprightness, and reconciliation is founded in the invisible world, and it will by degrees become manifest and apparent through the power of the Word of God!” As a result of consecrated human endeavour over decades, and indeed centuries, this spiritual reality is gradually expressed in physical form.¹⁰⁷

It is instructive in this respect that the Bahá'í writings place the initial locus of meaningful action towards creation of patterns of unity within the realm of individual human consciousness. It is through becoming aware of the fundamental unity of reality, and seeing the world through the eye of unity, that social unity can be accomplished. Bahá'u'lláh writes, that one should *“looketh on all things with the eye of oneness, and seeth the brilliant rays of the divine sun shining from the dawning-point of Essence alike on all created things, and the lights of singleness reflected over all creation.”*¹⁰⁸ Through “singleness”, the diversity implicit in unity can and should be recognized.

¹⁰⁶ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 24 (2nd ed., Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1982).

¹⁰⁷ Ltr. from the Universal House of Justice to anonymous (19 Apr. 2001) (quoting ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 409). See www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20010419_001/1#604877079.

¹⁰⁸ Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys and the Four Valleys*, p. 18 (Bahá'í Pub. Trust, 1952). [New tr. in *Call of the Divine Beloved*, p. 9: “... looketh upon all things with the eye of Unity, and seeth the effulgent rays of the Sun of Truth shining from the dayspring of the Divine Essence upon all created things alike, and beholdeth the lights of Unity reflected upon all creation.”]

One failure of both the integrationist and separationist approaches lies in not recognizing that the Bahá'í notions of maturation and unity build contingency into the vision of the Kingdom of God on Earth, and part of that contingency is the theoretical possibility that a wide range of divergent institutional forms may be valid expressions of Bahá'í teachings. Progressive revelation and emphasis on change and gradualism highlight the importance of human response and choice in how the ultimate pattern of the Kingdom of God emerges and takes shape.¹⁰⁹ A relative and progressive vision of God's interaction with humanity makes committing to the final form of the Kingdom of God a futile and irrational act. The final form(s) will be a contingent and historical reality, as even revelation is subject to historical reason.¹¹⁰

This vision is particularly highlighted when one examines the approaches to political and social change advocated by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. One finds in the Bahá'í writings a hierarchy of modes of political and social change. Action at the level of social meanings is most privileged, followed by changes at the level of behavioural norms, and finally political forms (such as laws and institutions). Simply stated, Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's method of change emphasizes the need to act at the level of meanings before seeking to make broad or comprehensive changes at the level of norms and forms. Indeed, such a diffuse approach to social change is dictated by the Bahá'í definition of unity. The Bahá'í notion of unity, with its embedded notion of diversity, does not allow for coercion as a means to change. This idea is expressed by the first principle enunciated by Bahá'u'lláh when he declared himself to be a Manifestation of God in 1863—the removal of the sword. Saiedi describes the implications of this principle in the following terms:

The prohibition of killing, violence, and religious coercion; the promotion of love, unity, and fellowship among peoples; the call for peace among the nations; the condemnation of militarism and of the proliferation of arms; the assertion of the necessity for education and productive employment; the condemnation of

¹⁰⁹ The emphasis on human response and choice was seen in a number of instances in Bahá'u'lláh's lifetime. For example, Bahá'u'lláh drew a connection between the lack of response of the world's kings and rulers to letters that Bahá'u'lláh addressed them, and humanity's pathway towards world peace. Specifically, the lack of response was a loss of the opportunity to emerge to a new pattern of civilization—a "Most Great Peace"—in the foreseeable future. Bahá'u'lláh writes that "[n]ow that ye have refused the Most Great Peace, hold ye fast unto this, the Lesser Peace, that haply ye may in some degree better your own condition and that of your dependants." Ltr. of the Universal House of Justice, *supra* n. 107.

¹¹⁰ Saiedi, *Logos*, *supra* n. 48, pp. 62–66, 322–324.

sedition; the assertion of the need for religion and social justice—all these are presented by Bahá'u'lláh as systematic expressions of the same underlying principle of the removal of the sword.¹¹¹

The elevation of change at the level of meanings over norms and forms is reflected directly in, among other things, Bahá'í law. As has been described elsewhere,¹¹² there has been a distinct trend toward moving Bahá'í law to the background since the time of Bahá'u'lláh. This backgrounding is expressed in the suspension of the application of many laws until the existence of a particular matrix of social meanings in which that law may be received without being a source of conflict. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

*Indeed, the laws of God are like unto the ocean and the children of men as fish, did they but know it. However, in observing them one must exercise tact and wisdom Since most people are feeble and far-removed from the purpose of God, therefore one must observe tact and prudence under all conditions, so that nothing might happen that could cause disturbance and dissension or raise clamour among the heedless. Verily, His bounty hath surpassed the whole universe and His bestowals encompassed all that dwell on earth. One must guide mankind to the ocean of true understanding in a spirit of love and tolerance. The Kitáb-i-Aqdas itself beareth eloquent testimony to the loving providence of God.*¹¹³

In this scheme that continues today, the application of Bahá'í law is contingent on particular meanings being extant so that the application of laws (which are by nature coercive) will reinforce meanings conducive to unity.

This privileging of social meanings is also captured in the Bahá'í principle of “non-participation in politics”.¹¹⁴ Bahá'u'lláh taught his

¹¹¹ *idem*, p. 243–244.

¹¹² Roshan Danesh, “The Politics of Delay—Social Meanings and the Historical Treatment of Bahá'í Law”, 35. *World Order* 33 (2004).

¹¹³ Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *supra* n. 3, p. 6.

¹¹⁴ For example, Shoghi Effendi writes:

We should—every one of us—remain aloof, in heart and in mind, in words and in deeds, from the political affairs and disputes of the Nations and of Governments. We should keep ourselves away from such thoughts. We should have no political connection with any of the parties and should join no faction of these different and warring sects.

Absolute impartiality in the matter of political parties should be shown by words and by deeds, and the love of the whole humanity, whether a Government or a nation, which is the basic teaching of Bahá'u'lláh, should also be shown by words and by deeds

According to the exhortations of the Supreme Pen and the confirmatory explanations of the Covenant of God Bahá'ís are in no way allowed to enter into political affairs under any pretense of excuse; since such an action brings about disastrous results and ends in hurting the Cause of God and its intimate friends. (*Directives of the Guardian*, pp. 56–57 (Bahá'í Pub. Trust 1973) (available at <https://reference.bahai.org/en/t/se/>))

believers to avoid partisan politics, a principle that could be interpreted as suggesting quietism and passivism. But such a rendering is inaccurate, for the issue is not politics itself, but whether engagement in contemporary political processes is an approach to social and political change reflective of the principle of unity. For Bahá'u'lláh, there was no value in Bahá'ís assuming positions of political power within current political systems.¹¹⁵ It can be argued that one reason for this is that the methods used to secure such power and the institutions in place for the exercise of power are not reflections of an ontology of unity, and attempting to enforce a religious program, including through contemporary political methods and institutions, is antithetical to unity.¹¹⁶ It is thus not surprising to find in the Bahá'í writings statements that clearly distinguish the Bahá'í Administrative Order from existing political institutions. As Shoghi Effendi states:

It would be utterly misleading to attempt a comparison between this unique, this divinely-conceived Order and any of the diverse systems which the minds of men ... have contrived Such an attempt would in itself betray a lack of complete appreciation of the excellence of the handiwork of its great Author

The divers and ever-shifting systems of human polity, whether past or present, whether originating in the East or in the West, offer no adequate criterion wherewith to estimate the potency of its hidden virtues or to appraise the solidity of its foundations.¹¹⁷

It is also for these reasons that Bahá'u'lláh informs the kings and rulers of the world that he is only concerned with the “hearts and minds” of people, for it is through influence at the level of human knowledge and awareness—and, by consequence, social meanings—that unity can truly begin to be reflected in social forms.

A good example of the Bahá'í method of focusing on change at the level of social meanings is seen in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's 1875 treatise *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih* (*Secret of Divine Civilization*). The *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih* was written at the explicit instruction of Bahá'u'lláh, who asked for an exploration of “the means and the cause of development and underdevelopment of the world in order to reduce the prejudices of the

¹¹⁵ See *supra* text accompanying n. 13 (concerning Bahá'u'lláh's focus on “hearts”).

¹¹⁶ Saiedi discusses at some length Bahá'u'lláh's rejection of coercion in public and social life. See Saiedi, *Logos*, *supra* n. 48, pp. 362–370.

¹¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, *supra* n. 7, p. 152.

dogmatic conservatives.”¹¹⁸ As such, *Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih* is a commentary on Iranian political and social reform, written at a time when reform sentiment was running high in the face of increasing contact with, and threats by, the West. The repercussions of that contact were increasingly strident voices asserting the incompatibility of Islam with aspects of progress seen in the West (the so-called “dogmatic conservatives”). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approach to reform argues for a change in the social meanings associated with politics within Iran and Twelver Shi’ism. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s opening address in *Secret of Divine Civilization* is to the traditional political actors who pursue political change—the Shah and the ulama. He begins by commending Násiri’-d-Dín Sháh (1831–96) for the efforts of his ministers in pursuing reform, but he then notes that reform has not gone far enough: Iran’s apex of glory is found in the past, while presently Europe and America appear at the apex of material and technological development.¹¹⁹ He next criticizes the ulama for their agitations against reform and condemns them for stalling progress.¹²⁰ After these brief statements to the main actors, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argues that the meaning of leadership and the role and character of government must change.¹²¹ He attempts to free political narrative from the stagnating impact of the occultation of the twelfth Imam, which contributed to Twelver Shi’ism doctrine preaching the illegitimacy of government pending the end of the occultation.¹²²

‘Abdu’l-Bahá attempts to rehabilitate political dialogue about the nature of leadership itself. His discussion of the Shah and the ulama’s leadership is not couched in theological niceties or eschatological condemnations. It is not coloured by the past or the attitudes toward leadership that dominated. In some respects, its form echoes the “Mirrors of Princes” tradition, which often would outline how rulers need to rule with justice, and the role of religion and the ulama in relation to the ruler’s power.¹²³ But ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s focus is different in a number of respects. He does not adopt the typical position of the “Mirrors of Princes” tradition that accepts autocratic rule. Moreover, he

¹¹⁸ Nader Saiedi, “An Introduction to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s The Secret of Divine Civilization, Converging Realities” §1.1 (Landegg Academy 2000) (available at https://bahai-library.com/saiedi_introduction_sdc).

¹¹⁹ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Civilization*, *supra* n. 63, pp. 5–13.

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ *idem*, p. 13–18.

¹²² This is seen in how, for example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasizes the centrality of mass education, democratization, and the end of imitation as keys to social change.

¹²³ “Mirrors for Princes” refers to the tradition of writing practical guides giving advice and instructions for rulers on their conduct.

does not focus solely on the role of the ruler in propagating justice, but rather includes the meanings that the masses of the people associate with leadership.¹²⁴ He engages in a detailed discussion of the need for rulers to associate themselves in the minds of the masses with freedom from political corruption, honesty, high levels of skill and education, personal integrity, and their practical performance as a leader.¹²⁵ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá demonstrates the uniqueness of his approach when he begins applying his criteria of leadership to possible democratic reforms that may be pursued. Consider the following:

*While the setting up of parliaments, the organizing of assemblies of consultation, constitutes the very foundation and bedrock of government, there are several essential requirements these institutions must fulfil. First, the elected members must be righteous, God-fearing, high-minded, incorruptible. Second, they must be fully cognizant, in every particular, of the laws of God, informed as to the highest principles of law, versed in the rules which govern the management of internal affairs and the conduct of foreign relations, skilled in the useful arts of civilization, and content with their lawful emoluments.*¹²⁶

Beyond the virtues of a righteous leader, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is arguing that Iranians must begin to achieve a mindset that focuses on the skills, utilities, and character of the people who lead them and of good governance. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá illustrates his point with a strikingly cogent and contemporary example of the dilemmas for governments where virtue and skill are not combined.

*If ... the members of these consultative assemblies are inferior, ignorant, uninformed of the laws of government and administration, unwise, of low aim, indifferent, idle, self-seeking, no benefit will accrue from the organizing of such bodies.*¹²⁷

In some respects, this discussion of leadership sounds quite modern. However, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá combines his pragmatic focus with a focus on the spiritualization of leadership that is dissociated from the religiosity of the past. He does link injustice with a “*lack of religious faith*”, but, more significantly, he says it is due to “*the fact that [the leaders] are uneducated.*”¹²⁸ He sees the necessity of an education in “*self-respect, in high resolves and noble purposes, in integrity and moral*

¹²⁴ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Divine Civilization*, supra n. 63, pp. 17–25.

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *idem*, p. 17.

¹²⁷ *idem*, p. 18.

¹²⁸ *ibid.*

quality, in immaculacy of mind”¹²⁹ for leaders who must be characterized by “excellent character, ... high resolve, ... breadth of learning, ... and [the] ability to solve difficult problems.”¹³⁰ This focus on character, integrity, nobility, and the education of leaders and their subjects is rooted in a view that the development of human capacities—intellectual, emotional, and spiritual—is the key to good governance and civil order. Religion proper only comes into this equation as relevant when it contributes to accomplishing this objective.¹³¹

While the specifics of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s definitions of leadership are interesting, his method is more crucial. His efforts focus on changing the collective associations that are applied to a social phenomenon. Shifting meanings is the prerequisite in his vision for meaningful political reform. This focus provides an important context for understanding how Bahá’í institutions may come to play a public role. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s mode of action is not to agitate for broad structural change or revolution or even changes in leaders without an *a priori* change in meanings. In today’s terminology, aspects of this approach to politics might be considered postmodern.¹³² It focuses on the mindsets and frames of reference individuals bring to politics. It recognizes that structural changes often reinforce pre-existing patterns—often oppressive and negative ones—because the contexts in which those structures exist have not been altered. It also points to the relationship between identification and politics, holding that individual identity, self-actualization, and awareness are necessary for successful democratic participation. In his commenting on the constitutional revolution that began in 1905, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continually reinforced the idea that for reform to succeed “*the Government and the People should mix together like honey and milk*”,¹³³ and that if this did not occur, “*the field [would] be open for the manoeuvres of others.*”¹³⁴ A suggestion is that absent this

¹²⁹ idem, p. 19.

¹³⁰ idem, p. 23.

¹³¹ For example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “*if religion becomes the source of antagonism and strife, the absence of religion is to be preferred. Religion is meant to be the quickening life of the body politic; if it be the cause of death to humanity, its nonexistence would be a blessing and benefit to man.*” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 22 (Bahá’í Pub. Trust, 1979).

¹³² I am using this term narrowly and cautiously. I am not implying the adoption or incorporation of any particular strand of so-called post-modernist philosophy or thought. Rather, I am simply referring to the fact that certain points of emphasis in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s argument are not ones that were stressed by modernity but rather are ones that have been stressed in political debate in response to and looking back on modernism.

¹³³ E.G. Browne, *Selections from the Writings of E.G. Browne on the Bábí and Bahá’í Religions*, p. 430 (Moojan Momen ed., George Ronald, 1987) (translating a portion of a tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to Muḥammad ‘Alí Khán).

¹³⁴ *ibid.*

identification of the general population with politics and their awareness of the political dimensions of their personal lives, politics is easily co-opted by the few and corrupted.

Other primary literature develops the theme that participation in contemporary political processes may potentially co-opt Bahá'í political ideas and practices transforming them into ones foreign to the core principles of the Bahá'í teachings.¹³⁵ Bahá'í formal prescriptions may mirror those that others are advocating, but the context—the meanings and norms—which 'Abdu'l-Bahá sees as fundamental to successful formal change and consistent with Bahá'u'lláh's teachings will not be present if the formal change occurs without the hard work needed for transformation at the levels of norms and meanings.

The hierarchical relationship among meanings, norms, and forms as modes of political action is a template against which the historical and contemporary Bahá'í community can be analyzed. A brief overview of the evolution of the structure and internal organization of the Bahá'í community illustrates this.

The first one hundred fifty years of Bahá'í history have been characterized by institutionalization and the development of an administrative system. The evolution of this system has had three distinct phases. The first phase, which occurred under the leadership of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, was characterized by a turn to the West, and in particular to the fostering and development of Bahá'í communities in North America. After 'Abdu'l-Bahá was freed from prison in 1908, he prepared for and undertook a 1911–12 journey throughout Europe, Canada, and the United States of America. During this journey 'Abdu'l-Bahá propagated the Bahá'í Faith; encouraged the nascent Bahá'í communities to more audacious forms of action; spoke with countless social, political, and academic leaders; and spoke out on the “hot” issues of the day, such as the impending World War, race, suffrage movements, and unions. His journey also laid the groundwork for North American Bahá'í communities to bear the responsibility of building up Bahá'í communities and administrative organs around the globe.¹³⁶

In the second phase of administration building, Shoghi Effendi guided the Bahá'í community to the fulfilment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's plan.

¹³⁵ For example, the Universal House of Justice, in explaining the Bahá'í avoidance of politics states “the aim of the Bahá'ís is to reconcile viewpoints, to heal divisions, and to bring about tolerance and mutual respect among men, and this aim is undermined if we allow ourselves to be swept along by the ephemeral passions of others.” Ltr. of the Universal House of Justice to anonymous (12 Jan 2003) (on file with author). See https://bahai-library.com/uhj_avoidance_politics_disputes.

¹³⁶ See Hasan M. Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 171–339 (George Ronald, 1971) (discussing 'Abdu'l-Bahá's journey to Europe and North America).

The original basic structure of the administrative order was to have elected bodies of nine individuals at municipal, national, and international levels. As well, there were appointed advisory positions. The process Shoghi Effendi employed for the construction of this system was to focus on local grassroots development, which, when the community had reached a suitable size and degree of administrative sophistication, could elect a national institution. It was on the foundation of these national institutions that the international body, and supreme authority, the Universal House of Justice, would be elected.¹³⁷

Shoghi Effendi died in 1957 before the election of the first Universal House of Justice, but under his guidance the institutionalization of the Bahá'í community had dramatically changed. The third phase in development began in 1963 when the Universal House of Justice was elected and the skeletal architecture of the administrative order was in essence completed.

Why does a community with a focus on cultivating a spiritual way of life and developing a mode of community life that reflected such spirituality, turn towards institutionalization in such a systematic way?¹³⁸ The process of institutionalization further clarifies the nature of politics and political action in the Bahá'í Faith. This experiment with the forms of politics, constructed completely apart from and without any direct engagement with external political processes and institutions, positions the Bahá'í Faith to have a global character to its administrative order. But this system of government is, for want of a better term, an experimental zone in which the Bahá'í community is attempting to erect institutions rooted in the meanings and reflecting the norms that the Bahá'í Faith argues should govern political life.

Neither McGlenn's English model nor Cole's separationist model, or even the tradition of integrationist theocracy, fit with this epistemic vision of political change. There is an inherent gradualism in the Bahá'í approach of being open to a vision of maturation, wherein a number of different forms of governance—and patterns of relationships between

¹³⁷ See Shoghi Effendi, *World Order*, *supra* n. 7 (discussing his approach to developing the Bahá'í administrative order).

¹³⁸ This has been an issue of discussion at certain periods within Bahá'í history and among academics. A few have suggested that the move to institutionalization, in particular under Shoghi Effendi, was a co-optation of an original vision that was more diffuse, informal, and open. This was seen most directly after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, when a very few Bahá'ís questioned the authenticity of his Will and Testament, the establishment of the Guardianship, and the move towards institutionalization that took place. There is historical and textual evidence, however, which illustrates that Bahá'u'lláh intended for some degree of institutionalization. For example, as discussed earlier, Bahá'u'lláh specifically contemplated the creation of "houses of justice".

civil and religious institutions—may be affirmed. Social meanings may develop in such a way that choices to move in a direction towards a “Bahá’í theocracy”, as articulated in integrationist perspectives, dominate in certain places. However, such a “theocracy”, were it ever to emerge, would have to remain consistent with the overarching principle of unity in diversity—including the essential implications for human rights and equality—and the predominance of the democratic principle within the Bahá’í Administrative Order. By consequence, this suggests great care and caution must be used in ascribing contemporary definitions and categories to the term “Bahá’í theocracy” or “Bahá’í state”.¹³⁹ At the same time, social meanings may emerge elsewhere to give another form to institutional integration; while in yet other contexts, institutional arrangements which appear as separationist in contemporary terms may be deemed as reflecting the most legitimate and appropriate interaction between the religious and political.

Such an open approach to forms of church and state in the Bahá’í Faith reflects the self-identity of the Universal House of Justice, which has expressed its commitment to an open and contingent vision of its own role in political affairs. In response to questions concerning the appearance of a “Bahá’í theocracy”, the Universal House of Justice stresses themes of gradualism, openness, and contingency. It states that a

fundamental principle which enables us to understand the pattern towards which Bahá’u’lláh wishes human society to evolve is the principle of organic growth which requires that detailed developments, and the understanding of detailed developments, become available only with the passage of time.¹⁴⁰

Employing a simple analogy,

if a farmer plants a tree, he cannot state at that moment what its exact height will be, the number of its branches or the exact time

¹³⁹ Theocracy literally means rule of God. Such rule is to be distinguished, for example, from a hierocracy, which means rule by clerics. In common and contemporary usage, however, theocracy has come to typically mean rule by religious entities and is conceived of as implying a necessary contradiction to democracy. This implied contradiction is rooted in the idea, for example, that it is inherently undemocratic for the members of one religious community to have all political power in contexts of diversity. Given the strong commitment to democracy and the removal of the sword in the Bahá’í Faith, one would expect different social meanings to be associated with the term “theocracy” as used in the Bahá’í context—definitions that may require more consideration of the literal meanings of the term. Similar arguments could be made concerning the term “Bahá’í state”, which, for example, might be understood as not necessarily implying institutional integration, but harmony among the principles guiding the conduct and objectives of political and religious institutions.

¹⁴⁰ Ltr. of the Universal House of Justice, *supra* n. 89.

of its blossoming. [H]e can, however, give a general impression of its size and pattern of growth and can state with confidence which fruit it will bear. The same is true of the evolution of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.¹⁴¹

Similarly, the Universal House of Justice states that “the Administrative Order is certainly the nucleus and pattern of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, but it is in embryonic form, and must undergo major evolutionary developments in the course of time.”¹⁴² It also echoes the vision of political action of ‘Abdul-Bahá by stating that “clearly the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth is a ‘political’ enterprise,” but “the Bahá'ís are following a completely different path from that usually followed by those who wish to reform society.”¹⁴³ They “concentrate on revitalizing the hearts, minds, and behaviour of people and on presenting a working model as evidence of the reality and practicality of the way of life they propound.”¹⁴⁴ Finally, the Universal House of Justice stresses the contingency of any shift towards a “Bahá'í state” or “Bahá'í theocracy” by stating that there are certain principles that may be identified as key to Bahá'u'lláh's vision of the unfoldment of the Kingdom of God on earth.¹⁴⁵ These principles stress that a movement towards a Bahá'í state is wholly in the hands of the state that wishes to pursue such a course.¹⁴⁶ The decision by a state and its citizens to adopt the Bahá'í Faith as the State Religion, let alone to the point at which a State would accept the Law of God as its own law and the National House of Justice as its legislature, must be a supremely voluntary and democratic process.¹⁴⁷

As a general principle, such a transition would have to occur “by constitutional means”¹⁴⁸ while Bahá'ís still observe principles of

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*

¹⁴² *ibid.*

¹⁴³ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ A question with respect to this particular letter on theocracy concerns how the term “political” is defined and used. The Universal House of Justice states that the Bahá'í Faith is political in the sense of “the science of government and of the organization of human society.” *Ltr. of the Universal House of Justice, supra* n. 89. At the same time, it states that the Bahá'í Faith “denies being a ‘political’ organization,” and Bahá'ís are not to be involved in “‘political’ matters”. *ibid.* It would be helpful to know precisely what distinguishes the first and second uses of the term. If building the Kingdom of God is political, presumably it includes allowance for certain types of political action—action that fits with the Bahá'í vision of how that Kingdom is to happen.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ *ibid.*

abstention from certain forms of political action, and it would have to be consistent with the core Bahá'í commitments to democracy and human rights.

It is curious that statements such as these have not been subject to more scholarly analysis or incorporated to a greater degree into the debate about church-state relations in the Bahá'í Faith. The self-perception and identity of the institution that is at the core of the church-state question are necessary corollaries to a close textual analysis of the statements of Bahá'u'lláh. Perhaps, as discourse on this subject develops, scholars will place further emphasis on analyzing and understanding the institution of the Universal House of Justice and the range of its possible future political role and relationship with civil governments.

3. An open vision of church and state

An epistemic vision of church and state is ultimately an open vision. Bahá'u'lláh's teachings represent an eschatological vision that consciously accepts the human dimension in how religions evolve in reality. With unity in diversity as the guiding principle, a firm commitment to a specific pattern and structure of church and state is inconceivable, even as Bahá'ís anticipate an increasing role for religion in public life. There is no linear form or expression to social maturation—there are only general directions of development. And, within limits, the end points are relative. In cultures with long traditions of theocratic structures, one might expect a transition to forms of theocracy to occur. In societies with a long tradition of separationist structures, the transition to increasing interaction between religion and politics will likely be very different, and the institutional forms might appear quite distinct from those in another context. The relationships between national Bahá'í institutions and civil governments in one setting will be very different than in another. By extension, the relationship of the Universal House of Justice to the state apparatus of one country may be quite different from another. Reflecting the non-coercive nature of unity, those relationships, should they ever emerge, would be constitutional and voluntary in nature. By failing to recognize the innate openness in Bahá'u'lláh's vision, both separationists and integrationists have made the same essentialist error; and by so doing, they have failed to explore a distinct religious vision of how church and state may interact. Indeed, what one sees in scholarship so far is a tendency to frame the debate through the often used polarizing lenses of theocracy and democracy, a debate seemingly indistinguishable from the poles that

dominate general debates about religion and politics. The emphasis found in the Bahá'í writings on action at the epistemic level and the core principle of unity in diversity may well inform better approaches to this important subject.