

THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS DEMOCRACY

An Introductory Bahá'í Perspective on the Democracy of the Conscience

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This essay will explore the meaning of religious democracy as mentioned in Bahá'í literature. To explore and elucidate this concept and its implications, the essay will compare it to the same concept as applied in political institutions and adumbrated in political literature. Secondly, the essay will attempt to explain the obligations and role of institutions, especially the government, in so far as religious democracy is concerned. Thirdly, it will be explained how this concept finds expression in Bahá'í collective institutions such as the Nineteen Day Feast, Spiritual Assemblies and annual Conventions and furthermore the Bahá'í principles underpinning it.

It is obvious that in political circles the term “democracy” has a variety of meanings which we cannot fully explore in this short essay. Therefore, in elucidating what this concept means politically, we will confine ourselves to the commonly known expositions of this concept. Longman’s Dictionary for Contemporary English explains democracy as “a situation or system in which everyone is equal and has the right to vote and make decisions”, while the Odhams Dictionary of the English Language defines it as government by all classes for the benefit of all classes. In his “Politics”, Aristotle says, “*a form of government is a democracy when the free, who are also poor and the majority, govern.*” And in another place he says, “*Democracy arises out of the notion that those who are equal in any respect are equal in all respects; because men are equally free, they claim to be absolutely free*”. In yet another place he says two principles characterizes democracy, i.e. majority and freedom. Immanuel Kant, in his work “The Science of the Right”, describes democracy as a situation which begins by uniting the will of all so as to form a people; and then it has to appoint a sovereign over this common union, which sovereign is no other than the united will itself.

Of course we all know the usual reference to democracy in politics as a government of the people by the people and for the people.

From the above-mentioned quotations, we learn that in politics, three foundational principles constitute a bedrock of democracy. These are the will of the majority, freedom and equality.

Before we look at what the Bahá'í Faith says about this concept it will be helpful to further explain that currently there is an emerging belief that the following are characteristics of a democratic government

- Respect of the rule law.
- Accountability
- Transparency
- Participation by civil society. (*Science Religion and Development: Some Initial Considerations by Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity, pp 9-10*)

What is religious democracy and how does it compare, conceptually and practically, to political democracy? Perhaps we should begin by indicating that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the Son of the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, commended the American democracy many times in His public addresses in America, published under the title, "The Promulgation of Universal Peace". In one instance He expresses hope of future success for the American democracy in these words:" *Let this American democracy become glorious in spiritual degrees even it has aspired to material degrees, and render this just government victorious.*" And in another instance He articulates the wish that the American democracy be the first nation to establish international agreement. (p. 67) However, in another place He firmly states that the foundation of this Faith is pure spiritual democracy. Hence, our interest in this concept.

In the Bahá'í Faith the concept of democracy is also related to the principles of majority, freedom and equality. However, in this essay we will attempt to elucidate how it relates to the principle of freedom only. As we attempt this exposition, we will refer to what the Bahá'í Faith teaches about the role of government institutions in preserving religious democracy and how this concept is articulated in the Bahá'í institutions.

The Bahá'í concept of freedom is closely related to three issues. These are obedience to the commandments of God, morality and the human conscience. When you explore these relationships, new significances about freedom and democracy are discovered. We should also note that the Bahá'í Writings teach that human conscience is sacred. That is, human conscience is a divine trust of God and must always be respected by both institutions and individuals.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith and His successor 'Abdu'l-Bahá explain that political freedom is not sufficient for mankind. Mankind needs the freedom that is experienced as a result of obedience to the laws of God. In this instance Bahá'u'lláh says: "*Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench. Thus warneth you He Who is the Reckoner, the All-Knowing. Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness.*"

Regard men as a flock of sheep that need a shepherd for their protection. This, verily, is the truth, the certain truth. We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others. We, verily, are the All-Knowing.

*Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will, that pervadeth all created things. Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth. Whoso hath tasted of its sweetness will refuse to barter it for all the dominion of earth and heaven." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 335) And 'Abdu'l-Bahá say: "Similarly, with regard to the peoples who clamour for freedom: the moderate freedom which guarantees the welfare of the world of mankind and maintains and preserves the universal relationships, is found in its fullest power and extension in the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh." (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 305)*

Therefore, true human freedom is obedience to God and the striving after His Will. Unlike political freedom, its source is not the will of the individual or the majority, but the Will of God. However, care should be taken not to understand the Bahá'í articulation of freedom as exclusive of the human will. What the Bahá'í Writings have done is to expand the definition of freedom beyond the human plane to the divine. Therefore, in the Bahá'í Faith, freedom is sacred! It is not merely human, it is divine. It is related to the human conscience. And earlier on we have said that the human conscience is an inviolable, sacred trust of God.

Furthermore, the Bahá'í Faith states that man exercises complete freedom regarding issues of morality. His liberty to choose in moral issues is free of all influence, including that of God Himself. 'Abdu'l-Bahá' says: "*Some things are subject to the free will of man, such as justice, equity, tyranny and injustice, in other words, good and evil actions; it is evident and clear that these actions are, for the most part, left to the will of man. But there are certain things to which man is forced and compelled, such as sleep, death, sickness, decline of power, injuries and misfortunes; these are not subject to the will of man, and he is not responsible for them, for he is compelled to endure them. But in the choice of good and bad actions he is free, and he commits them according to his own will.*" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 247)

The Bahá'í Teachings are emphatic that human conscience is a matter which is beyond man's power. Thus interference with the human heart or conscience or convictions is stringently forbidden. Neither an individual nor the government is allowed to adjudicate on this matter. 'Abdu'l-Bahá' says that if man's conscience, which is his private possession, is questioned and interrogated in this human plane, "*what further recompense remains for man in the court of divine justice at the day of general resurrection? Convictions and ideas are within the scope of the comprehension of the King of kings, not*

of kings; and soul and conscience are between the fingers of control of the Lord of hearts, not of [His] servants.” (Abdu’l-Bahá, A Traveller’s Narrative, p. 91)

From this quotation the rationale for non-interference with human conscience, ideas and convictions is clear. This issue resides in the domain of God and not of men. It is sacred. It is beyond human capacity to control and object against it. It is not its sacredness only that renders human conscience completely free from interference. The Bahá’í Writing further indicate that complete liberty of human conscience is beneficial for society in that it widens ideas, reforms moralities, improves conduct, discloses the secrets of creation, and manifests the mysteries of the contingent world. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: “*When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and the right of speech prevail—that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his belief—development and growth are inevitable.*” (Abdu’l-Bahá, A Traveller’s Narrative, p. 197)

Be that as it may, the Bahá’í Faith envisions that the government plays a role in matters of conscience. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’ says that to ensure the freedom of conscience and the tranquility of the heart and soul is one of the duties and function of government. He continues to say that any government, which acts in this manner, will experience progress and ascendancy over the others.

Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why Bahá’í institutions are not burdened with the responsibility to account to their electors for their decisions. They take decisions in accordance with their conscience and are responsible for those decisions to God and not to the people they represent. It would violate the sacredness of their conscience had they been required to be accountable for their decisions to their electors. This constitutes a significant variation between the practice of democracy in the Bahá’í Faith and its practice in non-Bahá’í circles - a variation which, we believe, emanates from the difference in the understanding of the genesis and meaning of human freedom. In politics, freedom of conscience, expression, convictions and ideas is advocated as a fundamental element of democracy. Without it the concept of democracy is seen as mutilated. In the Bahá’í Faith, the same freedom is regarded as a sacred attribute of man which has a divine meaning and origin.

In the book “Priceless Pearl” the wife of Shoghi Effendi, Ruhíyyih Khanúm, elucidates in these clear terms her understanding of democracy in the Bahá’í Faith: “*It (referring to the Bahá’í administrative system) was unique in history, divinely conceived and different from any system which had existed in the religions of the past. Fundamentally it was the vehicle of a future World Order and World Civilization which would constitute no less than a World Commonwealth of all nations on this planet. Though its entire structure of elected bodies was based on principles of universal suffrage and election by secret ballot, its ultimate workings were conceived of in a different light, for, unlike the paramount principle of democracy by which the elected are constantly responsible to the electors, Bahá’í bodies are responsible at all times to the Founder of their Faith and His teachings. Whereas in democracy the ruling factor at the top can go no higher than their own councils and their decisions are subject to the scrutiny and approval of those they represent, this ruling factor in the Cause of God is at once the servant of all the servants*

of God - in other words the body of the faithful - but responsible to a higher factor, divinely guided and inspired, the Guardian or sole interpreter, and the Universal House of Justice, the supreme elected body, or sole legislator. It will be seen that in this system the people, divorced from the corrupt influences of nomination, political canvassing and the violence of those whims and dissatisfactions so easily engendered in the masses by the working of the democratic principle alone, are free to choose those they deem best qualified to direct their affairs and safeguard their rights on the one hand, and to protect and serve the interests of the Cause of God on the other.

The elected Bahá'í bodies might be likened to a great network of irrigation pipes, selected and put together by the people for their own benefit. but life-giving waters from on high flow through this system, independent of the people, independent of any will of the pipes, and this water is the divinely guided and inspired counsels of the Guardian and the Supreme Body of the Cause, which they receive, in this Bahá'í dispensation, from no less a source than the twin Manifestations of God." (Ruhíyyih Khanúm, The Priceless Pearl, p. 348)

We end the essay with the following quotation from Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith: *"Let us also remember that at the very root of the Cause lies the principle of the undoubted right of the individual to self-expression, his freedom to declare his conscience and set forth his views."*(*Compilations, Principles of Bahá'í Administration*, p. 43)