

Common sense versus secularism: American Bahai literature as a window on implicit culture

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Baha'u'llah (1817-1892) and Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921), the founding fathers of the Bahai Faith, can fairly be described as prophets of postmodernism. They are advocates of democracy and modernisation, and of secularism in two senses: the neutrality of the state as between different concepts of the good, and the formal separation of religious and political institutions, with guarantees of non-interference in both directions. They are not, of course, anti-religious, nor do they believe in the restriction of religion to the private sphere. They believe in the cooperation of religious and political institutions in public action, on a basis of mutual respect and clear definitions of roles, for the good of society. This is one formula for a post-secular role for religion in post-modern society. But to be safe, a post-secular settlement between religious and political organs must be able to rely on a broad societal understanding that religion and politics are separate spheres, with different rules, which complement one another. This paper questions whether that understanding exists, even in countries where the separation of church and state has been strongly valorised for many generations. This implies that the discussion of a post-secular settlement is premature.

The Bahai teachings, and what Bahais believe

I will begin by looking at some of the portions of Bahai scripture available to the Bahais in the West before 1925, in the order in which they were accessible to English-speaking Bahais, and at the works that Bahais wrote in response. The differences between them reveal the other influences that are at work, which are the real topic of this paper. How did the rejection of secularism come to dominate, among westerners who are not extremely atypical for their societies, in a

religious community whose scriptures do not support it?

The first substantial work to reach the Bahais in North America was Browne's translation of Abdu'l-Baha's *A Traveller's Narrative*, which was published in 1891 before a North American Bahai community existed, and is widely used to this day by English-speaking Bahai communities. In the *Traveller's Narrative*, Abdu'l-Baha cites a passage from Baha'u'llah's Tablet to the Shah of Iran:

The Lord of He doeth what He will hath committed the kingdom of creation, both land and sea, into the hand of kings, and they are the manifestations of the Divine Power according to the degrees of their rank: verily He the Potent, the Sovereign. But that which God (glorious is His mention) hath desired for Himself is the hearts of His servants, which are treasures of praise and love of the Lord and stores of divine knowledge and wisdom.¹

Moreover, Abdu'l-Baha says in *A Traveller's Narrative*:

the fundamental intentions and ideas of this sect were things spiritual, and such as are connected with pure hearts; that their true and essential principles were to reform the morals and beautify the conduct of the human race, and that with things material they had absolutely no concern.²

And

¹ *Abdu'l-Baha, A Traveller's Narrative* 63. For a more recent translation of the tablet to the Shah see Baha'u'llah, *Summons*, paragraph 210.

² Page 39.

this sect have no worldly object nor any concern with political matters. The fulcrum of their motion and rest and the pivot of their cast and conduct is restricted to spiritual things and confined to matters of conscience; it has nothing to do with the affairs of government nor any concern with the powers of the throne; its principles are the withdrawal of veils, the verification of signs, the education of souls, the reformation of characters, the purification of hearts, and illumination with the gleams of enlightenment ...

[the Bahai scriptures] are entirely taken up with prohibitions of sedition, [recommendations of] upright conduct amongst mankind, obedience, submission, loyalty, conformity, and acquisition of laudable qualities, and encouragements to become endowed with praiseworthy accomplishments and characteristics. They have absolutely no reference to political questions, nor do they treat of that which could cause disturbance or sedition. Under these circumstances a just government can [find] no excuse, and possesses no pretext [for further persecuting this sect] except [a claim to the right of] interference in thought and conscience, which are the private possessions of the heart and soul...

[To ensure] freedom of conscience and tranquillity of heart and soul is one of the duties and functions of government, and is in all ages the cause of progress in development and ascendancy over other lands. Other civilized countries acquired not this preeminence, nor attained unto these high degrees of influence and power, till such time as they put away the strife of sects out of their midst, and dealt with all classes according to one standard....

Interference with creed and faith in every country causes manifest detriment, while justice and equal dealing towards all peoples on the face of the earth are the means whereby progress is effected. It is right to exercise caution and care with regard to political factions, and to be fearful and apprehensive of materialist sects; for the subjects occupying

the thoughts of the former are [designs of] interference in political matters and [desire of] ostentation, while the actions and conduct of the latter are subversive of 88 safety and tranquility.³

The teaching here clearly has two sides: both the renunciation of any political ambitions on the part of the Bahais, and a plea for the government to respect freedom of religion.

Not long after that, around 1900, Baha'u'llah's *Kitab-e Aqdas* was translated by a Lebanese Baha'i, Anton Haddad, and circulated widely in the American Bahai community (and presumably later in Canada). In it, Baha'u'llah addresses the kings saying:

By God, we do not wish to dispose of your empires but we have come only to dispose of the hearts. These are indeed the views of Baha and to this will bear witness the kingdom of names, were ye to understand! Verily he who obeys his Master turneth away from this world, how much more he who obeys this extolled one! ... No-one must object to those who govern the people. Leave unto them that which they have, and turn only unto the hearts ... Dominion we did not desire, but only the appearance of God and His authority, ... the kingdom we did not desire, but only the exaltation of the command of God and His praise, ... might and power we did not desire, but the mention of God and that which was revealed on His part,⁴

And addressing Tehran, he promises:

3 Pages 85-87. I have used Browne's inelegant translation. The matter in parentheses is Browne's explanatory insertions, except for my [the Bahai scriptures].

4 Beginning on page 22 of the typescript (about half way through the text), corresponding to paragraph 83 in the current numbering, followed by paragraphs 83, 95 and 173. Haddad's translation of paragraph 83 obscures the point: Baha'u'llah says that the Lord's disciple will renounce the world, and the detachment of the Lord (i.e. Baha'u'llah) must be even greater. The translation of paragraph 173 is also incorrect. Both are used here since we are interested in what was written in the scriptures available to the early American Bahais.

Affairs shall be changed in thee, and a republic of men shall rule over thee ... and thou shalt be wrapped in in tranquillity after disturbance. Thus the matter hath been decreed in a new book.⁵

Among the teachings of Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha is the establishment of an international tribunal to adjudicate between the nations, and of Houses of Justice at various levels to provide leadership for the Bahai community. It appears that the Bahais had great difficulty in grasping the possibility that these might be two different bodies. Abdu'l-Baha spoke on both questions in a book called *Some Answered Questions*, published in 1908.⁶ In chapter 45 Abdu'l-Baha refers to the infallibility (*ma'sūm*, protection) of the Universal House of Justice, and an explanatory footnote has been added:

Baitu'l-Adl, i.e. the House of Justice, is an institution designed by Baha'u'llah for the administration of the future city. The General House of Justice will determine the laws of the nation, and the International House of Justice will act as a tribunal of arbitration.⁷

This explanation, presumably by the Dreyfus since it appears in the French edition as well,⁸ makes the local Bahai House of Justice the administrative arm of local government, the national House of justice becomes the legislative arm of a national government, and the international House of justice becomes the judicial arm of and international government.

The world tribunal is also described in *Some Answered Questions*, which in Barney's translation says:

5 Paragraph 93 in the current numbering.

6 I am grateful to Gerald Keil for noticing the relevance of the footnotes in the translation, and for information regarding the German edition (Talisman9, 14 February 2005). I have used the 1908 London edition, since I have not been able to obtain the Philadelphia edition of the same year. The two printings have the same pagination.

7 Page 198.

8 *Les Leçons de Saint-Jean-D'Acre*, p. 188.

When the laws of the Most Holy Book are enforced, contentions and disputes will find a final sentence of absolute justice before a general tribunal of the nations and kingdoms (*mahkama-ye umūmiy-ye duwal-o-milal*), and the difficulties that appear will be solved.⁹

In the 1908 edition, a footnote to this explains that the general tribunal means: "The universal *Baitu'l-Adl*, a sort of tribunal of international arbitration, instituted by Baha'u'llah in the *Kitabu'l-Aqdas*, the Most Holy Book."

In conflating the Universal House of Justice with the International Tribunal, Dreyfus and Barney pass over the fact that Abdu'l-Baha has used different terms, and that the task of the members of the House of Justice is "to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to *enforce* that which is agreeable to them,"¹⁰ that is, that it has both legislative and executive functions (but for the religious law, not the civil law).

In the 1962 German translation (presumably based on a French or English version), this footnote moves the Universal House of Justice from the judicial to the legislative branch of civil government at the international level, but keeps the local House of Justice as the civil executive:

Baytu'l-Adl is the 'House of Justice,' an institution envisioned by Baha'u'llah for the administration of future cities. The National House of Justice will issue legislation for the nation, whereas the Universal House of Justice is for the whole world.

9 Page 74 of the 1908 edition, page 64 of the 1990 pocket-sized edition, page 70 of the 1954 French edition, pages 48-9 of the Persian edition (*Mufawadat-e Abdu'l-Baha*).

10 Baha'u'llah, Kalimat-e Firdawsiyyih, in *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* 68. What Barney could not have known (because it was first published in 1920) was that the electoral methods for the world tribunal were set out by Abdu'l-Baha in the 'Tablet to the Hague,' while the electoral methods for the Universal House of Justice are explained in other letters of Abdu'l-Baha that Shoghi Effendi has translated. These electoral methods are different.

In an undated edition from the United Kingdom (probably Collins item 3.128, which he dates 196X), the footnote explains:

Bayt'l-^cAdl. i.e., the House of Justice, is an institution designed by Baha'u'llah for the administration of the future city. The Universal House of Justice will determine laws not already revealed by Baha'u'llah.

This appears to be based on the 1908 version, but again moves the Universal House of Justice from the judicial to the legislative branch. The 1964 American edition has the same note as the 1908 edition, but in the 1970 printing of this edition, there is an erratum slip bound in which reads:

p. 198n: Baytu'l-^cAdl-i-A'zam, i.e., The Universal House of Justice, elected by members of the National Spiritual Assemblies. This body can make and abrogate its own laws and legislate on matters not explicitly revealed by Baha'u'llah.¹¹

This implicitly separates the Universal House of Justice from the Bahai teachings about world government. The footnotes in the 1987 edition and the 1990 American pocket-size edition are also correct on this point.

The successive versions reflect the efforts of a substantial group of the more educated western Bahais to make Baha'u'llah's world order model coherent, without knowing about (or while refusing to concede) its fundamental architecture: a dual complementary structure. In the end, they have found a formulation which avoids the issue by not mentioning the tribunal.

At this point, around 1910, we have Abdu'l-Baha in Palestine, the North American believers with the scriptural sources I have outlined, and some communication between them. Abdu'l-Baha seems to have

¹¹ My thanks to Randy Burns, on the Talisman9 discussion group 15 February 2005, for information regarding the 1964 edition and 1970 printing. The erratum clearly draws on explanations given by Shoghi Effendi in the 1930s: see for example *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* page 150 and 153.

been aware of what the American Bahais were thinking and writing to some extent. I have surveyed some of that early literature by Bahais in my *Church and State* and I will pass over most of it here: the confusion we see in the footnotes added to *Some Answered Questions* is a fair example. I found few Bahai authors who show any knowledge of the scriptural teaching on church and state, but also few indications of a strong theocratic stance. The founder of the North American Bahai community, Ibrahim Kheiralla, had taught that Isaiah 9:6 ("Unto us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder ...") could not refer to Jesus since Jesus was not a ruler (p. 136),¹² and that Baha'u'llah's Tablet to the Kings (*Lawh-e Muluk*) called on the rulers "to throw their kingdoms at his feet," whereas in fact the only ruler whom Baha'u'llah called on to abandon his kingdom was the Pope, and he was commanded to give it to the kings and not to Baha'u'llah.¹³ But by 1900, Kheiralla's influence in the community was already waning rapidly, and a book he wrote with Howard MacNutt in 1900 is self-contradictory, citing Baha'u'llah's words in Browne's translation of the Tablet to the Shah, stating that God has given the kingdoms to the kings, and reserved for himself the hearts of men, as well as endorsing the principle of 'render unto Caesar,'¹⁴ but also claiming that the world would be ruled by the holy household (descendants of Baha'u'llah) and by the House of Justice "in which all authority and administration should be vested. The power of the House

¹² This lesson is also reconstructed by Stockman, in *The Baha'i Faith in America* Vol. 1 page 74, drawing on the notes and on Kheiralla's books.

¹³ See Kheiralla's eleventh lesson, The notes on Kheiralla's early lessons in America (circa 1894-1900), printed by Browne in Materials, (128-142) show a typically millennialist approach to biblical interpretation. He anticipated the inauguration of the millennium in 1917. An accurate translation of the Tablet to the Kings is published in *Proclamation of Baha'u'llah* 85. The mistake can hardly have come about from confusing the tablets, since Kheiralla had only Browne's partial translation of the *Tablet to the Pope*, and this translation does not include the passage in which Baha'u'llah asks the Pope to abandon his kingdom (Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith in America*, Vol. 1 page 44; Browne, 'The Babis of Persia,' in Momen, *Selections* 269-273).

¹⁴ The page numbers are 487f and 509f (the Household); 432 (the House of Justice) and 420-21.

of Justice is absolute." So they have three distinct models: patrimonial government by the holy Household, an institutionalised theocratic rule by the House of Justice, and the separation of religious and political orders. The first of these is closest to what Kheirella had taught in his lessons for converts, the second is what Macnutt believed,¹⁵ and the third is what Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá taught.

Mason Remey's 1908 pamphlet, *The message of Unity* is more coherent: its summary of the essential 'Ordinances' of the Bahá'í Faith included the establishment of representative government and of the House of Justice as two separate Bahá'í principles. So did his presentation at the Third National Peace Conference in May 1911.¹⁶

The misunderstandings among the Bahá'ís, and the revolutionary situation in Iran and the involvement of Bahá'ís and Azalis in it, led to letters from Abdu'l-Bahá intended to remove any suspicion that the Bahá'ís harboured theocratic or political intentions. In one such letter, Abdu'l-Bahá instructed the Bahá'ís in America to cease using the name "House of Justice" for their elected religious institutions:

The signature of that meeting should be the Spiritual Gathering (House of Spirituality) and the wisdom therein is that hereafter the government should not infer from the term "House of Justice" that a court is signified, that it is connected with political affairs, or that at any time it will interfere with governmental affairs. Hereafter, enemies will be many. They would use this subject as a cause for disturbing the mind of the government and confusing the thoughts of the public. The

15 We know this because later, as editor of *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, he interpolated his theocratic views into the record of Abdu'l-Bahá's talks: the details are given below.

16 Cited by Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, Vol. 2, 366; published in *Star of the West* Vol. 2, No. 5, June 5 1911, page 11. In 1915 two lists of the essential Bahá'í teachings, presumably written by the editors of *Star of the West*, included "Creation of the House of Justice and institution of National Assemblies and Constitutional Governments." and "the necessity of the creation of the House of Justice and institution of National Assemblies and Constitutional Governments," formulations that echo Remey's closely (Vol. 5, No. 17 January 19 1915 page 274; Vol. 5, No. 18 February 7, page 282).

intention was to make known that by the term Spiritual Gathering (House of Spirituality), that Gathering has not the least connection with material matters, and that its whole aim and consultation is confined to matters connected with spiritual affairs. This was also instructed (performed) in all Persia.¹⁷

This is clear: the Bahá'í elected bodies should not form any part of the government, whether executive, judicial or legislative, and are not to interfere in any way with government matters.

At about the same time,¹⁸ in writing his *Will and Testament*, Abdu'l-Bahá complains that he has been accused of setting up "a new sovereignty" for himself, of conspiring with European powers against the government. He explains that the purpose of the Bahá'í revelation is:

that contention and conflict amidst peoples, kindreds, nations and governments may disappear, that all the dwellers on earth may become one people and one race, that the world may become even as one home. Should differences arise, they shall be amicably and conclusively settled by the Supreme Tribunal (*mahakame-ye umūmī*), that shall include members from all the governments and peoples (*duval wa milal*) of the world.¹⁹

In the same document, he sets out the mandate for the leadership of the Bahá'í community: a Guardian who is the "Interpreter of the Word of God," the highest doctrinal authority in the community, and the House of Justice (*bayt al-'adl*), to be responsible for leading the Bahá'í world in temporal matters (that is, not in doctrinal questions, which were the

17 Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas* vol. 1, (first published in March 1909), page 5.

18 The Will was written in two sections, in 1901 and 1905 respectively. The sections discussed here are from 1901, but only became known to the American Bahá'ís as extracts and summaries began to circulate in 1923.

19 Page 13; bilingual 22 / 13. Note that *milal* can also refer to religious communities.

sphere of the Guardian). Naturally it is elected only by Bahais, because its decisions only concern Bahais, and only Bahais are required to obey it.²⁰

As the Guardian took up his work as the doctrinal authority in the Bahai community, he made a number of interventions to combat theocratic ideas. One of the first was his translation and circulation of the *Will and Testament*, which we have just seen. In an important circular letter to in March 1932 Shoghi Effendi clarified the Bahai political teachings by writing, in 'The Golden Age of the Cause of Baha'u'llah', that the Baha'is did not intend "to allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries."²¹ The ink was barely dry before we see the first counter-argument from the theocratists, that the Bahais *might* allow it, but only if asked very nicely. This comes in Florence King's article 'Keeping the Wolf from the Door':

Let no one think that the Bahai's seek to overthrow the existing governments of the world because that is not their aim. This thoroughly governs the believers. If, however, the majority of the people of the world should some day accept Baha'u'llah as the 'Manifestation of God' and accept the teachings, perhaps this world form of government [the elected Baha'i Houses of Justice] would replace the separate and antagonistic governments of the world and thus a lasting unity, peace and harmony be established in the world. The coming of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth would then be realized.²²

In 1935, Shoghi Effendi published his translations of a selection of Baha'u'llah's works, known as *Gleanings*, which highlights the theme that God has delegated worldly rule to worldly rulers. In these works, Baha'u'llah says:

The instruments which are essential to the immediate

20 "it must be elected by universal suffrage, that is, by the believers. . ."

21 Published in *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* 66.

22 *Star of the West*, Vol. 23, No. 2 May 1932 page 54.

protection, the security and assurance of the human race have been entrusted to the hands, and lie in the grasp, of the governors of human society. This is the wish of God and His decree....²³

God hath committed into your hands the reins of the government of the people, that ye may rule with justice over them, safeguard the rights of the down-trodden, and punish the wrong-doers. If ye neglect the duty prescribed unto you by God in His Book, your names shall be numbered with those of the unjust in His sight.²⁴

Ye perpetrate every day a fresh injustice, and treat Me as ye treated Me in times past, though *I never attempted to meddle with your affairs*. At no time have I opposed you, neither have I rebelled against your laws. ... Know for a certainty, however, that whatever your hands or the hands of the infidels have wrought will never, as they never did of old, change the Cause of God or alter His ways.²⁵

your Lord hath committed the world and the cities thereof to the care of the kings of the earth, and made them the emblems of His own power, by virtue of the sovereignty He hath chosen to bestow upon them. He hath refused to reserve for Himself any share whatever of this world's dominion. ... The things He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts, that He may cleanse them from all earthly defilements ... The world and its vanities, and its glory, and whatever delights it can offer, are all, in the sight of God, as

23 Cited as translated by Shoghi Effendi in *Gleanings* CII. More literally: 'The reins of protection, security and assurance in outward matters are in the mighty grasp of the government. This is the wish of God and His decree....'

24 *Gleanings*, CXVI, 247. It is significant that the rulers are said here to rule on behalf of God, rather than as deputies of the Qa'im. Since Baha'u'llah himself claimed to be that Qa'im, the latter position (which would be expected in the light of the Shiah background) would have been an implicit claim that these rulers were subordinate to Baha'u'llah.

25 Letter to Persian Ambassador Hājī Mīrzā Husayn Khān, *Gleanings*, CXIII 224.

worthless as ... dust and ashes. Would that the hearts of men could comprehend it! ... Cast them away unto such as may desire them, and fasten your eyes upon this most holy and effulgent Vision.²⁶

The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath ever regarded, and will continue to regard, the hearts of men as His own, His exclusive possession. All else, whether pertaining to land or sea, whether riches or glory, He hath bequeathed unto the Kings and rulers of the earth. From the beginning that hath no beginning the ensign proclaiming the words "He doeth whatsoever He willeth" hath been unfurled in all its splendor before His Manifestation. What mankind needeth in this day is obedience unto them that are in authority, and a faithful adherence to the cord of wisdom. The instruments which are essential to the immediate protection, the security and assurance of the human race have been entrusted to the hands, and lie in the grasp, of the governors of human society. This is the wish of God and His decree....²⁷

Out of the whole world He hath chosen for Himself the hearts of men – hearts which the hosts of revelation and of utterance can subdue. Thus hath it been ordained by the Fingers of Baha, upon the Tablet of God's *irrevocable decree*, by the behest of Him Who is the Supreme Ordainer, the All-Knowing.²⁸

...is it not your clear duty to restrain the tyranny of the oppressor, and to deal equitably with your subjects, that your high sense of justice may be fully demonstrated to all mankind? *God hath committed into your hands the reins of the government of the people, that ye may rule with justice over them*, safeguard the rights of the down-trodden, and

punish the wrong-doers.²⁹

The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. To none is given the right to act in any manner that would run counter to the considered views of them who are in authority. That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts ...³⁰

Towards the end of his life, Baha'u'llah wrote an extended doctrinal work that summarises his teachings, called *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. This had already been published in English in 1928, based on a previous French translation, but in 1941 Shoghi Effendi published a new translation. In it, Baha'u'llah says:

Regard for the rank of sovereigns is divinely ordained, as is clearly attested by the words of the Prophets of God and His chosen ones. He Who is the Spirit (Jesus) -- may peace be upon Him -- was asked: "O Spirit of God! Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" And He made reply: "Yea, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."³¹

Taken together, Shoghi Effendi's translation work and his own writings appear as a sustained battle against the theocratic views which were, nevertheless, gaining ground in the Bahai community.

Developments after 1925

We have seen that the Bahai scriptures are unusual in containing a forthright, repeated endorsement of the secular principle. Yet much of the Bahai secondary literature in Western languages has argued against the separation of church and state, for the role of one religion in providing norms and values for society, for an ultimate Bahai theocracy in which, to quote one Bahai author, "the Baha'i spiritual assemblies will be the local government and the national spiritual

26 Lawh-i Nabil-e A'zam, in *Gleanings* CXXXIX 303-4.

27 The Lawh-e Ashraf, in *Gleanings*, CII 206-7.

28 *Gleanings* CXXVIII 279.

29 Suriy-ye Muluk, in *Summons*, paragraph 21; *Gleanings* CXVI 247.

30 *Gleanings* CXV.

31 *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* 89

assemblies the national government.³² To this one could add that informal sources, such as experience at summer-schools and participation in email discussion groups, and McMullen's sociological study of the Bahais of Atlanta, confirm the view that a significant proportion of the Bahai community today lean towards similar views. I have surveyed this literature elsewhere, and will content myself with a few highlights here.

Keith Ransom Kehler, in her 1933 article 'Baha'i Administration as Presented to a Group of Free Thinkers,'³³ says that the "International House of Justice has only a legislative function; it alone can enact those universal laws that apply equally to all mankind" ... "Any nation refusing to submit to its commands must be immediately suppressed by a combination of all other nations." The House of Justice is not to be accountable to its constituents or to the group, because it is guided by God.³⁴ "The third form of government, monarchy, is provided through the Baha'i institution of the Guardianship" or rather to a line of Guardians extending "forever."³⁵ What the Free Thinkers would have made of this prospect can be imagined.

David Ruhe, in his 1948 essay 'Religion for adults' claims that the Bahai Faith "declares the need for fusion of church and state without equivocation."³⁶ Ann Boyles has a survivalist fantasy, imagining that "If nations break down, Local Spiritual Assemblies will still be able to govern the affairs of the communities." This claim was published in the biannual official publication *The Baha'i World* for 1993-4,³⁷ which she edits. In John Huddleston's *The Search for a Just Society*, the Bahai administrative order is referred to as an 'alternative system of government' which is to replace obsolete democratic institutions in a

32 John Robarts, *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi*, 174.

33 *Star of the West* Vol. 24, No. 7 October 1933 page 216. Quoted sections at pages 218-9. A year earlier she had stated that world economic problems would be solved by the establishment of the Universal House of Justice (' Religion and Social Progress ' in *Star of the West* Vol. 23, No. 5 August 1932, page 143).

34 *Star of the West* Vol. 24, No. 7 October 1933 page 217.

35 *Ibid.* 218-9.

36 'Religion for adults'

37 <http://www.animana.org/tab1/12bahai-postmodernism.shtml>

peaceful transition.³⁸

When Horace Holley wrote an Introduction to Shoghi Effendi's *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (1938), he claimed that:

the old conception of religion, which separated spirituality from the fundamental functions of civilization, compelling men to abide by conflicting principles of faith, of politics and of economics, has been forever destroyed. The command, "Render unto God that which is of God, and unto Caesar that which is of Caesar," has been annulled by the law of the oneness of humanity revealed by Baha'u'llah.³⁹

As we have just seen, Baha'u'llah in fact endorsed this verse from Matthew (22:21), and Holley must have known it. His statement has been republished many times, and Holley himself was one of the most influential Bahais in the North American community. His formulation is very revealing about the reasons for his resistance - if not outright rejection of - Bahai teachings. His understanding of 'oneness' is that it is morally monolithic, under the command of religion, even if there are spheres of responsibility reserved to governments (as he explained nearly 20 years later, in *Religion for Mankind*, (1956, p 155)).

Locating Bahai theocratic thinking

Holley and the other authors I have cited are not wild-eyed millennialists looking forward to divine intervention and the rule of God's elect. Holley is doing his best to fit the Bahai teachings, which require a postmodernist conception of society with functionally differentiated spheres that operate according to their own principles, into an older paradigm in which the state is the central institution of a society that ideally functions under the coordination of one ideology.

38 *The Search for a Just Society* 425, 426, 448.

39 Page vii. Strangely enough, the 1974 edition of *The World Order of Baha'u'llah* (called the 'second revised edition', but in fact the fourth edition: 1938, 1955, 1965 and 1974) still contained Holley's statement, despite the existence of an office of literature review under the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States whose stated purpose is to correct factual errors in the presentation of the Bahai teachings.

He does not get his political ideas from Bahai scriptures, obviously, but also not from an evangelical or millenialist readings of the Bible. There is no discussion of the throne of David, no references to the book of Revelation, none of the fiery rhetoric that would mark influences from that direction. What he is drawing on is simply a common-sense conception of 'what society is' and of religion's role in society, and this common sense understanding has no room for the complexity and differentiation of a modern society, let alone for a postmodern organic network.

Views such as these are found in the Bahai literature from the earliest days, and have gradually gained in predominance especially following the death of Shoghi Effendi, but have never been undisputed until, in 1999, the Universal House of Justice addressed a letter to the Bahai world warning of a "campaign of internal opposition to the Teachings" in which "Shoghi Effendi's explanation of Baha'u'llah's vision of the future Baha'i World Commonwealth that will unite spiritual and civil authority is dismissed in favour of the assertion that the modern political concept of "separation of church and state" is somehow one that Baha'u'llah intended as a basic principle of the World Order He has founded." Shoghi Effendi did not in fact speak about a "future Baha'i World Commonwealth that will unite spiritual and civil authority," and the letter does not indicate where the Universal House of Justice may have drawn this idea from. The views of the Universal House of Justice are not doctrinally binding on Bahais, since doctrine and interpretation are the prerogative of the Guardian not of the House of Justice, but the letter did mean that those who hold to the scriptural teachings, having been branded as an 'internal opposition' could only have a marginal role in the Bahai community, which the Universal House of Justice heads. At the same time, recent academic studies,⁴⁰ have recognised that Baha'u'llah was a prophet of modernity, or even of post-modernity, and an advocate of

40 Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe* 412, 217. Kathryn Babayan's *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs* (2002) 487-489. Mangol Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent* 130; Juan Cole, 'Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic thought in the 19th Century' and *Modernity and the Millennium*; McGlinn *Church and State* and 'A Theology of the State,' Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization*.

the separation of church and state. A considerable gap has opened up between the popular religion and informed views of what Baha'u'llah thought and hoped to achieve: the Bahai community is in a position analogous to those Christian churches a century ago, in which there was a doctrinal rejection of the source-critical account of the history of biblical texts, while their more informed members were accepting and using these methods. The split between popular religion and informed views is not unusual and not necessarily fatal. Nor is it to the point here: I mention it only because readers would otherwise wonder how the conflict of ideas outlined above finally turned out.⁴¹

From my reading of Bahai secondary literature in general, and not just in the American community, there seems to be a broad trend from the belief that the Bahai faith does not have institutions that could constitute a 'church,' in the first decades of the 20th century, to the belief that the elected Bahai institutions (and in some cases the Guardian as world monarch) will eventually form a government that replaces civil government. A few authors use theocratic language, but are in fact concerned with the extent to which the state lives up to religious and ethical ideals, rather than with the form of government. Nevertheless, their inexact use of terms reinforces the interpretive tradition in the Bahai community that does speak of theocracy as the institutional form of government.

Second, there is an increasing reliance on a dispensational argument, in which the Bahai teachings on civil government and on the

41 The theocratic idea has since been adopted as a theme by a committee that prepares study material for the American Bahai community, in their material for 2005-2006. See http://www.education.usbnc.org/a_themes/a_theme_2005.htm accessed 8 January 2006; study materials prepared by the National Education and Schools Office of the National Spiritual Assembly. The proof text they use is not authentic: the phrase "the consummate union and blending of church and state" and some other changes were interpolated by Howard Macnutt, whom I mentioned as the co-author of a book in 1900. The two further uses of this quotation are at pages 6 and 13 of the document. The original and interpolated versions of what Abdu'l-Baha said on the topic are presented in my *Church and State* 226-230. With the adoption of MacNutt's interpolations as official study material for the American Bahais, and his ideas as official doctrine, the victory of the theocratic movement in the community is complete - for now.

structure of the Bahai institutions are seen as referring to two consecutive stages. This is an interpretive strategy, replacing the earlier conflation of the two sets of institutions. It is still theocratic, since the religious institutions are expected to eventually replace the civil ones.

Third, there is a striking lack of scriptural references in the majority of these works. The differentiation between the spheres of religion and of politics is ironically present: when one talks of politics, the scriptures are not consulted.

The near unanimity of the theocratic view in Bahai secondary literature should be distinguished from the theocratic views we find among Christian or Islamic integrists, where there is an elaborated theory of divine government and a collection of scriptural texts and arguments that support it. I have reviewed a good selection of the Bahai theocratic writers, but have not found one who bases this belief on Bahai scriptures. If I took a similar sample of Christian writers supporting 'dominion theology' or theonomy, or a sample of Islamic writers supporting the restitution of the caliphate, I would find a fairly well defined collection of biblical or quranic quotes, repeated by various authors, with the same arguments being used. That would be the sign that there is a group of people committed to theocratic theory who are talking to one another, in print and informally, and are working out their political theory. The absence of that sort of agreement among the Bahai theocratic writers tells me that there has not been a group of Bahai integrists thinking about the issue and searching for scriptural supports. The absence of any support in the Bahai scriptures tells us that the sources for the Bahai theocratic movement are societal: and that is precisely why they are interesting – as a window into the implicit religion and social assumptions of their environment.

Sources of theocratic thinking

What interests me in this paper is how the rejection of secularism came to dominate, among westerners who are not extremely atypical for their societies, in a religious community whose scriptures do not support it.

From the weakness of the argumentation and the low rhetorical temperature of the treatment, it appears that anti-secularist assumptions were rather a feature of the cultural background than a strongly-held opinion. To be more specific, if culture consists of relatively crystallised patterns of communication, and embraces the three subsets of symbolic structures, ideology and common sense, the roots of Bahai theocratic ideas lie more in the common-sense element, while the roots of Christian theocratic thought lie more in symbolic structures, and those of contemporary Islamic integrism in ideology.⁴²

As for social factors, one possible source is the Christian millenarian background of many of the early believers in the West. Jewish expectations concerning the Kingship of the Messiah certainly shaped the reception of Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom (what, after all, was Simon Peter doing in the Garden of Gethsemane with a sword, in John 18:10)?⁴³ One would expect the same dynamic to play out with western Bahais, in relation to Christian millenarian expectations. However while millenarian themes are found in many of the writers considered, when they address the question of forms of government their writing lacks the vivid apocalyptic rhetoric and the symbolic aggression *vis-a-vis* the existing order that one finds in millennialist movements whose expectation of becoming God's earthly government is more lively.⁴⁴ None of the authors who favour a theocratic model directly connect this with the coming of the Messiah, the end of the powers of this world and a government by God through his elect (Revelations 20:1-5). Nor do any of the writers appear to be personally interested in the prospect of participating in theocratic institutions ruling the world, or in inciting their readers to anticipate the prospect of sitting on the thrones of the elect and witnessing the debasement of their enemies. While the fit with Christian

42 This analysis has been developed from a suggestion in Fischer, *Iran* 7.

43 See also Matthew 26:51, Luke 22:49-50.

44 It must also be said that I have not considered some Bahai writers, notably Ruth Moffet (*New Keys to the Book of Revelation*, New Delhi, Bahai Publishing Trust, 1977) and Robert Riggs (*The Apocalypse Unsealed*, New York, Philosophical Library, 1981) whose writings reflect a vivid apocalyptic imagination. I consider these authors marginal in the Bahai community.

millennialism or Islamic Mahdism or califate theology may seem very strong, it would be a mistake to locate the early Bahais of the West largely in a millennialist framework.

I would like to put forward another, and sobering, possibility. Perhaps theocratic ideas are no more pervasive in the western Bahai communities than they are in western countries at large. Perhaps the ready acceptance of such ideas by Bahais, entailing in some cases an explicit rejection of democracy, and in every case the rejection of some of democracy's essential principles, is not due to some abnormality in the social background of the early Bahai believers, and is not to be explained solely by the artificial plausibility ideas may obtain when repeated over time in a closed, all-encompassing, community. Perhaps it is in fact a fair representation of the general population's lack of understanding of, and lack of commitment to, the operating principles and mechanisms of a modern society. Perhaps it reflects a common-sense assumption about the all-encompassing nature of religion that is not confined to millenarian, Bahai or Shiah circles. Or perhaps it reflects an unvoiced wish – by people generally – to be able to believe that the system under which they live is a theocracy, so that one can believe that an all-seeing God will enforce its laws on secret transgressors. As John Walbridge has noted (not in relation to the Bahai Faith):

it seems to be the case that many people instinctively want their regime to be theocratic. In the United States, the government and constitution were established in the full light of history by individual politicians well known to the people, politicians who tended to be free-thinkers in matters of religion. Nonetheless, within a few years Americans were hailing their constitution as being written under divine inspiration.⁴⁵

Conclusions

The workshop topics for this conference have no place for the role of new religious movements and spirituality in relation to secularism,

which is an omission to note in passing. They do have a place for traditional, non-western alternatives to secularism. The assumption is that western people have largely accepted secularism, and any questioning or alternative will come from outside the West. But the secularism in the Bahai teachings comes from the 'east' (perhaps influenced by pre-Islamic Persian models of kingship and religion), and is embodied in the religion's scriptures, while the resistance to it in the Bahai community, in the form of the Bahai theocratic movement, has drawn on the traditional, western models of society which the Bahai converts brought with them in their baggage as they became Bahais.

The profile of Western Bahai communities is not highly abnormal. They are more cosmopolitan than their host societies, have a somewhat higher average educational level, a slight preponderance of women, an over-representation of people working in the caring professions. Compared to the societies they come from, the Bahais are rather earnest about life: they are concerned about peace and the suffering of humanity, they are cosmopolitan in outlook: but none of this in the extreme. By looking at how these communities have drawn on anti-secularist attitudes they brought with them into the Bahai community, and sustained them even in the face of an explicitly secularist scriptural tradition, we get a sobering picture of how little understanding and commitment the secular principle enjoys in Western societies. It shows that a strong religious symbol system such as Dominion Theology, or a strong ideology such as Islamism, are not required to reject secularism: 'common sense' - based on an existing and widespread worldview - does most of the work before the arguments are even raised. Very many people, I suggest, live in modernity without really accepting its secularity, maintaining their belief that religion should be everything, by postponing its social realisation into the future. The New Jerusalem in which the righteous reign under the religion of your choice is retained, but it is always 'next year.' Through the postponement mechanism, a pre-modern rejection of secularism can exist under the surface. But the hope of a stable post-secularist society rests on the supposition that the people have

45 Walbridge, 'Theocracy.'

understood and internalised the desirability of the separation of the religious and political orders, so that a fruitful organic relationship between them can now replace legal compartmentalisation. I do not think this is realistic, yet.

I have only considered the Bahai community in North America, but I suggest that similar studies could be done of the French-speaking, German-speaking, and English communities, since each of these produced enough literature for us to see what converts from these societies were thinking without requiring field-work or even extensive archival research. An idea of thinking in the British Bahai community could be based around the chapter on politics in the successive versions of Esselmont's much-revised introductory book, *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*. Bahai writers are required to submit their books and articles to a vetting committee established by their national community, which means that anything that has been checked and vetted represents at least a widely held view in that Bahai community, but not necessarily an absolute consensus. A review of published Bahai literature therefore gives a good first approximation of what the Bahais were thinking, and if the survey is restricted to converts from that society, the elements in the Bahai literature which are not based on Bahai scripture, or are opposed to the scripture, give us a picture of the conscious or unconscious assumptions about religion and society that the converts bring with them.

Finally, a post-secular settlement

Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha taught the separation of church and state, but they also advocate the cooperation of religious and political institutions in public action. Baha'u'llah writes

Our hope is that the world's religious leaders and the rulers thereof will unitedly arise for the reformation of this age ... Let them ... take counsel together and, through anxious and full deliberation, administer to a diseased and sorely-afflicted world the remedy it requireth.⁴⁶

46 *Gleanings*, CX 215-6.

And

They that are possessed of wealth and invested with authority and power must show the profoundest regard for religion. In truth, religion is a radiant light and an impregnable stronghold for the protection and welfare of the peoples of the world, for the fear of God impelleth man to hold fast to that which is good, and shun all evil.⁴⁷

And

In formulating the principles and laws a part hath been devoted to penalties (*qisās*, or *lex talonis*) which form an effective instrument for the security and protection of men. However, dread of the penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God.⁴⁸

The last paragraph from the Lawh-e Dunya cited above points to one argument for the need to go beyond the formal separation of church and state, and one that is valid for all societies and religions. This is that no state based entirely on coercion can be a good state, but the state itself lacks legitimate instruments to elicit altruism. In the twentieth century, we saw what happens when the state, through nationalism and other ideologies, attempts to make itself the object of altruism. Good governance therefore depends on social organs, including religious organisations, which foster altruism and ethical behaviour in society. The work of these organisations in elevating (or domesticating) the people cannot be effective unless they are seen to be in a position to call governing institutions to observe the same high ethical standards.

Religion therefore has legitimate public roles,, as one of the providers of virtuous, altruistic and law-abiding citizens to the state, as a source of wisdom the state can draw on, and in providing an ethical

47 *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* 125.

48 *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* 92-3.

critique of the state. Another aspect of this cooperative relationship is mentioned by Baha'u'llah in the Lawh-e Hikmat:

The beginning of Wisdom and the origin thereof is to acknowledge whatsoever God hath clearly set forth, for through its potency the foundation of statesmanship, which is a shield for the preservation of the body of mankind, hath been firmly established. Ponder a while that ye may perceive what My most exalted Pen hath proclaimed in this wondrous Tablet.⁴⁹

Religion (and not any specific religion) provides a legitimization for civil governance as such. In contrast to naive anarchism, the marxist delusion that the state may wither away, integrists' principled rejection of the state and the far more widespread cheap sideline cynicism about politics and politicians, religions since the Bhagavad-Gita have been reminding us that our religious duty to care for our fellows requires the instrument of the state to be effective, and anything that is required to perform a religious duty, is itself a religious duty.

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