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*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.*

— Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i Ashraf [1]

## **Theocratic Ideas and Assumptions in Bahá'í Literature: An Inquiry**

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**A survey of Bahá'í secondary literature in major European languages indicates that most commentators have supported the idea that Bahá'ís do not accept the separation of church and state. In contrast, this essay presents scriptural support that suggests that the institutional differentiation of the religious and political orders is a central Bahá'í doctrine. This essay examines one passage from the writings of Shoghi Effendi that might plausibly be interpreted in a theocratic sense, and one phrase interpolated into *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, and then argues against the theocratic theory by criticizing one form of argument that has been used to support it. Beyond this, it points to three challenges facing the Bahá'í community: the need to provide explicit scriptural foundations to support ideas presented as Bahá'í teachings; the need to clarify certain attitudes toward politics; and the need for moral self-examination. If Bahá'ís are to present Bahá'u'lláh's remarkably modern teachings to the world, they will need to detach themselves from some inherited ideas and from their emotional associations.**

In February 1995, I presented a paper on 'Church and State in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh' at the Bahá'í Studies Colloquium.[2] The 'church' part of the title is inaccurate, since the Bahá'í Faith is a religion, not a church, and the institutional structure of the Bahá'í community is not a single organisation but an interlocking set of institutions with distinct functions. Nevertheless, "church and state studies" is the accepted name for such studies, whether the society concerned is Christian, Muslim, Hindu or, in this case, the prospective Bahá'í society as we find it in the Writings. My paper argued that institutional differentiation of the political and religious orders is a basic, and therefore a permanent, doctrine of the Bahá'í Faith. During the question time that followed the

presentation, I was asked why I had not dealt with the counterarguments, since Bahá'ís have generally supported a theocratic model (that is, the government of the state by Bahá'í religious institutions) for a future world order. My answer then was that I had not found any published presentation of the Bahá'í theocratic position that cites scripture or gives arguments. I hoped that my paper would at least show that the theocratic model is not self-evident, and that this might prompt others to make explicit what has merely been assumed. The counterarguments could then be addressed and theories modified accordingly.

### **Church and State in the Secondary Literature**

The direct response I had hoped for has not been forthcoming. There is still, to my knowledge, no coherent published statement of the notion that the Bahá'í teachings advocate theocracy. [3] But I have, in the meantime, collected twenty-five books and articles by Bahá'ís that mention a theocratic model of government. These are listed in the bibliography, with brief comments on some of them. Others are discussed in the text below. [4] The results of this literature search were also negative in terms of uncovering the texts and arguments on which theocratic ideas in the Bahá'í community are based: I found many references to the church-state relationship or to Bahá'í theocracy, but these were neither supported by arguments nor based on what Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi have written on the topic. The few that do cite any scriptural source cite one that is not authentic, or one that contradicts their conclusions, or they do not explain the connection between the citation and the conclusion. [5] The reasons why Bahá'ís hold theocratic beliefs remains unclear, but there is no doubt that a considerable portion do.

Many of the works that mentioned political teachings took a theocratic position, mostly by implication, some explicitly. But this is not unanimous. In one early Bahá'í pamphlet (1925), Charles Mason Remey argues against the theocratic model, and in favor of a pious society, involving “not a union of church and State, but a union of religion and State.” Remey presents only his conclusions, without indicating their basis, and he seems to have been alone among the authors of his generation. Juan Cole's 1992 article, “Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the Nineteenth Century” marks a renewed interest by Bahá'ís in Bahá'u'lláh's political thought. His focus is mainly on Bahá'u'lláh's advocacy of democracy and parliamentary government, but he also says that Bahá'u'lláh “clearly envisioned the Baha'i houses of justice as coexisting alongside secular parliaments and rulers” (p. 15). He has expanded considerably on this in *Modernity and the Millennium*, which I have reviewed elsewhere. [6] Christopher Sprung, in his essay ‘Bahá'í Institutions and Human Governance’ (1996), addresses the question but comes to no conclusion. He does insist that there is “a solid ambiguity linked to the question: is it completely correct to suggest that the Bahá'í system means and implies ‘rule by God’?” [7] Most recently, Nader Saiedi has taken an anti-theocratic stance, which is outlined in the bibliography.

Although the publications that have questioned the theocratic view are confined to the last decade, this does not mean that there was no debate on this point in the intervening decades. A member of the H-Bahai discussion list (September 10, 2001), writes: “I was

born in a Bahá'í family in the United States . . . For as long as I can remember, there were Bahá'ís who asserted that the local Spiritual Assembly was destined to assume all of the functions of local government and the National Spiritual Assemblies to do the same with national governments. . . . And there were those, and I was eventually among them . . . who disagreed and asserted that the Bahá'í writings do not seem to say that. . . .”

Leaving aside the last decade, however, we must conclude that the secondary Bahá'í literature has almost unanimously endorsed theocratic concepts. One example from this literature might serve to illustrate what I mean by ‘theocratic thought’ in the strict sense in the Bahá'í context. It appears in the Encyclopaedia of Islam, in the lemma ‘Bahais,’ and was written in 1958 by Alesandro Bausani. He says that:

The Bahá'ís do not accept the separation of Church and State, but maintain that in the absence of priests and sacraments the Bahá'í fusion of religion and administration will take on a different character from that of the traditional theocracies.

The last two words here suggest that Bausani is thinking of a letter written on behalf of the Guardian, which says: “What the Guardian was referring to was the Theocratic systems, such as the Catholic Church and the Caliphate, . . . The Bahá'í theocracy, on the contrary, is both divinely ordained as a system and, of course, based on the teachings of the Prophet Himself . . .” [8] This letter describes the Bahá'í ‘system’ as a theocracy. But a little further research shows that the letter is not referring to the system of government in a Bahá'í state: it is an explanation of some words of Shoghi Effendi, who had written that: “the Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh [does not] conform to . . . any of the various theocracies, whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic which mankind has witnessed in the past.” [9] No one would dispute that the Bahá'í Administrative Order could be called theocratic, although it is unlike previous systems in detail and because its principle features are set out in the Bahá'í scriptures. But this is not theocracy in the political sense, where the state is governed by the religious order. The letter says only that the Bahá'í Administrative Order—the religious order in itself—is theocratic. But in this limited sense, any free religion is theocratic, for it is governed by a religious order: itself.

Theocratic political theories are an entirely different thing: these advocate that the state should be ruled by the religious order. It appears that Bausani began with an assumption, that the Bahá'í administrative order is also intended to be a government. That is, he has assumed a political theocratic theory. He has then observed that the Bahá'í Administrative Order itself is called “theocratic,” and has concluded that a Bahá'í government would also be theocratic. This is circular reasoning—it only says something about the Bahá'í teachings regarding government if we have already assumed that the Administrative Order is intended to serve as a government. Such circularity is quite typical of the references to a theocratic order, and of claims that the Bahá'í Faith does not recognize the separation of church and state, that I have found in the literature by Bahá'ís. It is because the reasoning is circular that my efforts to discover the roots of such thinking have proven inconclusive.

In the course of this search of the literature, I also found many references to the theocratic model of Bahá'í government in works not written by Bahá'ís. These range from more or less well-informed academic studies to (sometimes) virulent attacks. The most destructive of these to date has been the claim by Shaykh Mohammad Taghi Falsafi, on Iranian radio programs in 1956, saying that there was a Bahá'í plot to take over the country. This resulted in mob violence and government action suppressing the Bahá'í Faith.[10] Other claims that the Bahá'ís aim at establishing a theocracy have damaged the prestige of the Bahá'í Faith in the West. [11] Some of these non-Bahá'í works do give sources in the Bahá'í writings, or a coherent argument. But since they have no bearing on the reasons why Bahá'ís themselves have believed in theocracy, I have not considered these authors here.

In the hope of prompting a discussion that is based on texts and arguments (and accepting the risk that I may be accused of setting up a straw man), this paper will focus on one text from Shoghi Effendi, one saying that has been attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and one type of argument that I have called 'dispensationalism.' I will attempt to demonstrate that none of these is adequate to support a theocratic model against the weight of the scriptural evidence to the contrary. The scriptural evidence, it will be argued, supports the proposition that the institutional differentiation of the religious and political orders is a central and permanent doctrine of the Bahá'í revelation.

### **Setting Up a Straw Man**

Let us imagine that I did find a Bahá'í author who wrote: The Bahá'í teachings regarding government present a theocratic model, in the sense that the institutions of religion and government are to merge, with the institutions of the Bahá'í administrative order taking over the functions of local and national governments. This can be seen from the following two sentences from Shoghi Effendi:

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 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 superstate.[12]

And suppose our author continues: While there are also many passages in the Bahá'í writings that do mandate a civil state governed by human governments, and some specifically endorsing the separation of church and state and condemning the interference of religious institutions in government, these must refer to preliminary stages as the world

evolves towards a full theocracy. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the institution of the Universal House of Justice represents “the consummate union and blending of church and state.”

My imaginary author presents us with a definition, two proof texts, and a strategy for resolving apparent contradictions with other scriptures. This argument is, of course, a ‘straw man’ in the sense that it is my own creation. No theocratic authors have been so explicit about the roots of their theocratic beliefs.[13] But, it is at least an honest straw man. There is some evidence that the words attributed to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá have in fact influenced some Bahá’ís, and the other points are the strongest, not the weakest, arguments that I can imagine that might underlie theocratic thought.

## Definitions

The fact that my imaginary author includes a definition of theocracy is important. Some of the Bahá’í authors in my literature survey use the word theocracy, but they are really speaking of a society permeated by religion, rather than of government by religious institutions. For example, John Hatcher, in *The Law of Love Enshrined*, refers in passing to “a spiritually based society, essentially theocratic in form,” as if the two are necessarily the same thing.[14] Others use the word theocracy, but in reference to the Bahá’í administrative order rather than to a Bahá’í government. Yet others simply assume that anything that is divinely ordained, as both the civil government and religious institutions are ordained in the Bahá’í writings, is by definition theocratic. But this is clearly not true: monarchy, mosquitoes, marriage, and my own progressive baldness are all in different senses ordained by the Creator and have their place in the grand scheme of things. But they are not theocratic. The question here is not whether God rules. In the debate about Bahá’í theocracy, the question is: To whom has God delegated authority as regards earthly government—to the “Kings and Rulers” or to Spiritual Assemblies and Houses of Justice?

Most Bahá’í authors cannot be described as promoting theocracy as a political theory, for they have no political theory. Theocracy appears rather as a background assumption, unelaborated and without an explicit basis. Their views should be attributed to asking inexact questions, using terms imprecisely, or to circular reasoning. Other authors work with a model of society that is so simple that politics itself would be impossible. One form of imprecision is to take a scriptural passage referring to the Bahá’í Administrative Order, assume that this is the same thing as a Bahá’í government, and conclude that the Bahá’í government would be theocratic. A variation is to take a passage referring to the Bahá’í Commonwealth (the ‘umma, or religious community) and suppose that this is the same thing as the world commonwealth of nations (the political federation of states). In both cases, the Bahá’í writings are read within an *a priori* assumption that the Bahá’í teachings do not support the separation of church and state.

I do not mean to denigrate the intelligence or sophistication of the literature, but rather to emphasize the low ideological “heat” around this issue within Bahá’í communities. There appear to be few, if any, Bahá’ís who have thought about the issue systematically and worked out a theocratic theory of government or who have any personal commitment to

theocracy as an ideology. This is important because it contrasts Bahá'í ideas starkly to contemporary Islamist movements. The latter do have elaborated political theories, with lines of argument and scriptural sources to justify them. Despite the similarity between Islamist and Bahá'í theocratic ideas, they are completely different sociological phenomena.[15]

### **The 'Establishment' of Religion**

The first sentence of the quotation from The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh above provides an opportunity to clear up some terminological misunderstandings. It says that the Bahá'í Faith will be recognized as “the State Religion” of at least one country. In other works, Shoghi Effendi refers to the Faith’s “establishment and recognition as a State religion.”[16] We need therefore to be clear about what is meant here. The establishment of religion (having an ‘established church’) has some negative associations, especially for Americans, because of the role of England’s established church in the founding myths of the United States. These associations need to be made explicit and so cleared away.

- + In the first place, the establishment of religion does not mean theocratic government. Establishment is a constitutional agreement between the state and one or more religious organizations to place the relationship between them on a long-term footing, and thus beyond the vagaries of day-to-day politics.
- + Second, the establishment or disestablishment of religion does not entail—or even foster—the restriction of religion to the private sphere. Religion plays a more visibly intrusive role in American politics than it does in either England or Denmark, both of which have established churches.
- + Third, establishment is not compatible with a church-state. Establishment is only possible if the church and the state are two separate and distinct institutions, so that they can recognize and affirm one-another. For this reason, the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the religious institutions define the limited role that is permitted to politics and closely supervise political life, is properly seen as a theocracy, not as a state with an established religion. In the Iranian model, the political order does not have the power or freedom to establish or disestablish religion; whereas in England and Denmark the state as a sovereign entity has chosen to establish particular national churches.
- + Fourth, while establishment may privilege one religious group over others, it does not necessarily do so: England and Denmark do not discriminate between citizens on the basis of religion. Nor is establishment necessarily confined to a single church or religion. In a pluralist society such as the United Kingdom, the state could invite confessions other than the Church of England to provide members to sit alongside the Bishops in the House of Lords, not because they represent a certain proportion of the population (the Lords is not meant to be representative in that sense), but because their religious traditions represent a source of wisdom that can contribute to the process of governance.
- + Fifth, establishment does not in itself say anything about the religious quality of the

state: the state may regard religious institutions in a purely pragmatic fashion as a means of inculcating desirable ethics and providing necessary social services, or it may be motivated by religious conviction and bind itself to follow religious teachings. Shoghi Effendi presents these as successive stages in the relationship, when he refers to “the stage of establishment” being followed by “the emergence of the Bahá’í state itself.”[17] In Roman history too, we can see a considerable gap between the establishment of Christianity and the Christianization of the Roman state, and also that this was not achieved once-for-all.

Having set aside what establishment does not mean, or does not necessarily mean, we are left with a minimal definition. The establishment of religion requires only that there be a constitutional understanding between a state and one or more religious institutions: it is a contract between government and religion as partners.

### **Church and State in the Bahá’í Scriptures**

Before addressing the crucial second sentence from The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh cited by my imaginary author, we should briefly consider other relevant passages from the Bahá’í writings; for no reading of a single passage can be relied upon unless it is placed in the context of the broad sweep of Bahá’í scriptures.

Working chronologically, we must start with the doctrine of the two sovereignties that is one of the major themes of the *Kitáb-i Iqán*. The first kind of sovereignty is spiritual:

. . . 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. . . . That sovereignty is the spiritual ascendancy . . . which in due time revealeth itself to the world . . . [18]

The sovereignty of the prophets resides in the power to attract devotion and to change hearts, to reform morals, call forth sacrifices, and to create a new form of human community. While it is clearly differentiated from the worldly sovereignty, and superior in as much as it is long-lasting, Bahá’u’lláh does not say that it also entails temporal government. On the contrary:

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. [19]

In the opening section of the *Súriy-i Mulúk*, it is true, Bahá’u’lláh commands the kings to

“Fling away . . . the things ye possess, and take fast hold on the Handle of God.”[20] However, this submission to the will of God, through acceptance of the revelation of Bahá’u’lláh, clearly does not require that the kings should abdicate their thrones. Bahá’u’lláh goes on to command them to rule justly; to care for the poor; to form international agreements; to moderate their armaments, expenditure, and taxation; and to punish wrong-doers:

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.[21]

In the *Kitáb-i Aqdas*, Bahá’u’lláh recognizes and honors the institution of human government, in the forms of monarchy, democracy, and republican government, and he enjoins all people to obey “those who wield authority.” Given the importance attached to this book, no alteration to these principles is conceivable. Bahá’u’lláh announces himself using messianic political titles (“the desire of the nations” and “the King of kings”) so that the reader has no doubt that this is the Qá’im speaking. But he combines this with an equally forthright renunciation of any claim to earthly sovereignty:

He Who is the sovereign Lord of all is come . . . from the heart of Zion there cometh the cry: “The promise is fulfilled” . . . Ye are but vassals, O kings of the earth! He Who is the King of Kings hath appeared, . . . Arise, and serve Him Who is the Desire of all nations, Who hath created you through a word from Him, and ordained you to be, for all time, the emblems of His sovereignty. . . . By the righteousness of God! It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men. . . . To this testifieth the Kingdom of Names, could ye but comprehend it. . . . Forsake your palaces, and haste ye to gain admittance into His Kingdom. This, indeed, will profit you both in this world and in the next.[22]

The Aqdas also contains a similar passage addressed to republican governments in America, and another promising that Tehran will have both a monarchy and a democratic government.[23] Without entering into a discussion of Bahá’u’lláh’s ideas about forms of government, it is important to note that, while he frequently addresses monarchs in the Aqdas, his theology and ethic of government apply to governments of whatever form.

Another text from the same period as the Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh’s letter to Pope Pius IX (1869), gives an indication of the church-state relationship he favored. Bahá’u’lláh advises the Pope to:

Abandon thy kingdom unto the kings, . . . Exhort thou the kings and say: ‘Deal equitably with men. Beware lest ye transgress the bounds fixed in the



Book.' [24]

From this it is clear that religious institutions are not intended to withdraw to an apolitical cloister, but to work in the body politic within the ethical sphere, with full respect for civil government, and without laying claim to the authority that God has delegated to the “kings.”

In the *Lawh-i Duniyá*, Bahá'u'lláh proposes a specific role for the Iranian clergy and senior government officers in a body that appears to be a constitutional convention to frame reforms for Iran (although it might also be a permanent legislature).[25] The argument for a consultative role for the clergy is repeated at more length in his *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*,[26] citing Mark 12:17 (“Render unto Caesar”) and Qur'an 4:62. He goes on to apply the same model of separated but cooperating church and state institutions to the Bahá'í institutions:

According to the fundamental laws which We have formerly revealed in the *Kitáb-i Aqdas* and other Tablets, all affairs are committed to the care of just kings and presidents and of the Trustees of the House of Justice. . . . The system of government which the British people have adopted in London appeareth to be good, for it is adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people.

It may well be that it is not only English constitutional monarchy that Bahá'u'lláh admires, but also the constitutional position of the church in England. The Church of England is within the state, broadly defined, but it is not in the government. It is in a position to be consulted, to criticize, and to provide religious services to the state, but not to rule or to coerce belief.

As it happens, the United Kingdom also provides us with an analogy of the relationship between religious and political orders, for it is called ‘united’ because it consists of two separate kingdoms, England and Scotland, having different laws but united under one crown. If we substitute the political order for “Scotland,” and the religious order for “England,” and God for the sovereign over them both, we have a good model of the teachings regarding the church-state relationship in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh: church and state are two allied kingdoms under the sovereignty of God.

This constitutional settlement—of co-operating religious and state orders—is implied again by Bahá'u'lláh in the *Lawh-i Maqsúd*:

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.[27]

Much the same points are repeated in later writings.[28] There seems to be almost a

plaintive tone as Bahá'u'lláh writes again, probably towards the end of his life:

Most imagine that this Servant hath the intention of establishing a full-blown government on earth—even though, in all the tablets, He hath forbidden the servants to accept such a rank. . . Kings are the manifestations of divine power, and our intent is only that they should be just. If they keep their gaze upon justice, they are reckoned as of God.[29]

In summary, the separation of church and state, as distinct but interdependent organs within the body politic, is one of the key themes running through Bahá'u'lláh's life work, and he takes a single position, from his first major doctrinal work to his Will and Testament, the Kitáb-i 'Ahd.[30]

### **The Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá**

Many of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letters are relevant to the question of theocracy, but only one of his book-length works, the *Risálih-yi Siyasiyyah* (1893) [31] will be mentioned here. This draws extensively on Iranian and Ottoman political history to demonstrate that the separation of church and state, and freedom of conscience, are prerequisites for good government, while the interference of religion in government, or *vice versa*, has always brought disaster. Similar points are made in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* and *A Traveller's Narrative*. [32]

'Abdu'l-Bahá relates the separation of church and state to two fundamental forces, or metaphysical principles (*quvvih*): the first, the principle of governance “which bestows external happiness on the human realm . . . safeguards human life, property and honor”; the second “represented by the spiritual, holy authority, heavenly, revealed books, divine prophets, celestial souls, and the learned in the All-Merciful.” Religious leaders, including “divine prophets,” do not enter the political sphere because:

. . . the affairs of leadership and government, of kingdom and subjects, already have a respected object of authority, an appointed source, whereas a different holy center and distinct wellspring exists with regard to guidance, religion, knowledge, education, and the promulgation of good morals and of the virtues of true humanity. These latter souls have nothing to do with affairs of civil leadership, nor do they seek to interfere in them. Thus, in this most great cycle of the maturity and adulthood of the world . . . it is written [by Bahá'u'lláh] in the Book of the Covenant . . . whose decree is decisive . . . : “O ye the loved ones and the trustees of God! Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth, and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain. Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. This is a decree of God in this Most Great Revelation. It is divinely

preserved from annulment . . .”[33]

Religious leaders, he says, can only advise:

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

A similar description of religion and the state as distinct and cooperating spheres is found in his *Will and Testament*:

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 . . .”[34 ]

Thus, in the writings of both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we find that the political and religious orders should be distinct but not hermetically separated. They are organs of one body, whose distinct natures are required so that they can work together. The world and its political institutions are not to be abolished in the Kingdom of God, but rather baptized with the spirit and thus strengthened.

### **The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh**

Now, equipped with a general concept of how this topic is treated in the Bahá’í writings, we can return to the specific passage from Shoghi Effendi cited in our “straw man” argument. The first of the sentences from *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh* said that the Bahá’í Faith will be recognized as “the State Religion” of at least one country. He continues:

And as the Bahá’í Faith . . . 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 superstate.

Taking this passage in isolation, one possible reading is that the Universal House of Justice will exercise the rights of the government of the super-state. But is that the most likely way to read the text? We have seen above that this would be contrary to the principles found in the Bahá’í scriptures. It would also involve an unexplained contradiction because of the

different memberships and electoral methods for the Universal House of Justice and the institutions of world government.[35] Beyond this, however, I think that there are reasons in the text itself to believe that Shoghi Effendi did not intend any reference to the Universal House of Justice as a world government when he wrote this passage.

In the first sentence, the Faith attains the stage of becoming “the State Religion of an independent and Sovereign Power.” What has changed in the second sentence? The Faith has become more widely accepted, and by a number of Sovereign States, and the Universal House of Justice has come into being as the supreme institution of a Bahá’í Commonwealth (Shoghi Effendi was writing in February 1929, before the Universal House of Justice existed).

We should note that Shoghi Effendi differentiates consistently between the Bahá’í Commonwealth and a commonwealth of nations. The first refers to the believers in solidarity with one another, analogous to the Islamic *‘umma*, or to Gibbon’s use of the term “Christian commonwealth” to refer to the Christian community before the age of Constantine. The second refers to a commonwealth whose members are nations, united in an analogous, but political, bond of solidarity. The Universal House of Justice is said to be the supreme organ of the first, but never of the second. The Universal House of Justice has in fact been the “supreme organ of the Bahá’í Commonwealth” from the day it was first elected.

Now if Shoghi Effendi was intending to say that the Bahá’í administrative institutions should become the governments of nations, the decisive change in the role of the Universal House of Justice would come when a National Spiritual Assembly had become the government in one nation. But what is said is that the Faith will first become the State Religion of one power and then, as more countries become Bahá’í States, the Universal House of Justice will come to exercise some function in the superstate. One might understand this to be the role of government, but it seems more logical, in the light of the progressive structure of the paragraph, to suppose that Shoghi Effendi expected us to understand that it would be the “State Religion.” The Bahá’í Faith becomes the state religion first of one country, then of more, and finally the Universal House of Justice has rights, duties, and responsibilities in the world superstate because it is the supreme organ of the Bahá’í Commonwealth. This seems to imply that the Universal House of Justice occupies the position of an established religious institution at a global level, in relation to the separate institutions of world government.

Another plausible reading of this passage has recently been suggested by Juan Cole on the Talisman9 discussion list. [36] He proposes that the passage means that it is incumbent upon the world’s future super-state that the Universal House of Justice should exercise all the rights, duties, and responsibilities attendant upon the fact that the Universal House of Justice is the supreme organ of the Bahá’í commonwealth. The two readings produce the same result: mine supposes that Shoghi Effendi intended us to carry over the phrase “the State Religion” from the previous sentence, while Cole’s reading involves a rather unusual syntactical structure. We may never be certain about exactly what Shoghi Effendi meant

here, but enough has been said to demonstrate that there are alternatives to a theocratic reading.

In relation to this passage, I would also like to caution against an attitude that leads readers to search the Writings diligently to find a single passage that can support a preestablished view, rather than examining the Writings as a whole to see what they say. We need to consider the broader implications of our readings of particular texts and always read them in the context of the body of Bahá'í scripture and interpretation.

In addition to reading our 'problem text' in relation to the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá, we should also place this text from Shoghi Effendi alongside clearer texts by the same author. The first parallel text is found just two months earlier, in a letter dated December 6, 1928, and published in *Bahá'í Administration*. With regard to events in Persia, Shoghi Effendi then welcomed "the slow and hidden process of secularization" as one of the "symptoms that augur well for a future that is sure to witness the formal and complete separation of Church and State."<sup>[37]</sup> In passing, it should be noted that secularization means literally the withdrawal of religious institutions from the control of other social spheres, such as politics, economics, science, and law. But the word is often used to refer to the profanation or disenchantment of the world, to a society in which religion itself is incredible or irrelevant. These are two different processes, the first positive and the second negative. What Shoghi Effendi is welcoming is secularization in the first sense, the gradual demarcation of distinct spheres of religion and politics, reducing both interference by the Iranian government in matters of conscience and the political and judicial power of the Shí'í clergy.

The next passage is three years later, in the letter 'The Golden Age of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh,' where he writes:

Theirs is not the purpose, while endeavoring to conduct and perfect the administrative affairs of their Faith, to violate, under any circumstances, the provisions of their country's constitution, much less to allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries.<sup>[38]</sup>

This is very strong: the "much less" construction seems to mean that allowing the Bahá'í administrative institutions to supersede national governments would be worse than a violation of the constitution. It certainly rules out the suggestion that the Bahá'í institutions could accept temporal power if it were freely offered to them. It does not seem unreasonable to assume that this passage should be read as correcting misunderstandings that had arisen from the passage in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* that has been discussed above. We must at any rate recognize that it is the same Shoghi Effendi writing both pieces, and read the first in the light of the latter.

By 1936, in 'The Unfoldment of World Civilization,' Shoghi Effendi is describing the state mechanisms of a world commonwealth that is "sustained by its allegiance to one

common Revelation,” [39] without even mentioning the existence of a Universal House of Justice (although religion is mentioned alongside other aspects of life, such as science, commerce, the media, etc.). And at about the same time he must have been selecting the tablets for inclusion in his 1939 translation, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, including the Lawh-i Ashraf (CII), Súriy-i Mulúk (CXVI), Lawh-i Maqsúd (CX), Lawh-i Nabíl-i A'zam (CXXXIX), and Lawh-i Dhabíh, (CXV). This activity would be consonant with a concerted effort on his part, between 1932 and 1939, to make it clear to the Bahá'ís that the Bahá'í teachings do not permit any religious institutions to assume temporal power.

We have now dealt with the scriptural source, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, which I believe is most likely to be responsible for sustaining theocratic ideas in the contemporary Bahá'í community. This is the only passage of authentic Bahá'í scripture that I know of which is open to a theocratic reading. But we have seen that such a reading would be inconsistent with the main lines of Bahá'í teachings, and with Shoghi Effendi's other writings, and that there are alternative ways to read it that do not produce problems of consistency.

### ***The Promulgation of Universal Peace***

Before passing on to discuss the type of argument which I have called dispensationalism, I would like to look at an earlier passage which might, in part, explain the popular Bahá'í beliefs on this topic. These are the words attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, in which he appears to refer to the “House of Justice” as “the consummate union and blending of church and state.” [40]

This might appear to be a very weak argument, put up only to be knocked down, since most Bahá'ís would be aware that reports of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements are not authentic Bahá'í scripture. Can it really have had any influence on Bahá'í thinking? A survey among Bahá'ís would be required to provide a clear answer, but it is striking to me that the only Bahá'í author using a theocratic model who cites any source to explain these beliefs, cites this one. This is Loni Bramson-Lerche, in her 1991 essay ‘An Analysis of the Bahá'í World Order Model.’[41] Moreover one reviewer of an earlier version of this essay objected to my saying that this passage is not authentic, citing a letter on behalf of the Guardian which states that: “It is permissible to use selections from *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* in compilations.”[42] It appears salutary, therefore, to review the standards by which we should judge the authenticity and degree of authority of words attributed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and also to look at the history of this particular phrase.

In a 1930 letter, the Guardian's secretary wrote on his behalf:

The early translations are far from being accurate, no matter who the translator may be. Shoghi Effendi firmly believes that only Tablets with the Master's signature and in the original tongue should be recognised. Any

translations or copies of them fail from having real authority. [43]

If this is true of translations of tablets, where the translator has at least had an authentic written copy from which to work, it is doubly true of *ad hoc* translations of ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s talks. In these situations, the interpreter has worked without preparation, and a note-taker has done his or her best to record the simultaneous translation. This record is no different in principle to table talks, where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would speak to pilgrims, an interpreter would do his best to convey his meaning, and the pilgrims would take notes.

As regards the reports of talks, the Guardian’s secretary wrote in 1947 that:

“Nothing can be considered scripture for which we do not have an original text. A verbatim record in Persian of His talks would of course be more reliable than one in English because He was not always accurately interpreted . . .”[44]

‘Abdu’l-Baha himself, referring to these talks, speaks of “errors and deviations committed by previous interpreters.”[45] Thus it goes against a very strong principle of Bahá’í hermeneutics to use such reports as a basis for defining Bahá’í law or belief.

If the original reports of these talks have a rather minimal status, analogous to pilgrim’s notes, the revised versions of these reports in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* and *Paris Talks* must be given an even lower status: they are often indicative of the editor’s opinions rather than what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said. The passage in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers to the “House of Justice” as “the consummate union and blending of church and state” is a striking example of this. As Jennifer McNair pointed out on Talisman9 on 7 Jan 2001, this phrase is an editorial insertion into the English notes of the talk published in *Star of the West*, Vol. 4, No. 15 (December 12, 1913). The original reads:

The eleventh teaching is the organization called, The House of Justice, which is endowed with a political as well as a religious aspect. It embodies both aspects, and it is protected by the Preserving Power of Baha’o’llah Himself.

In 1925 the editor of *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, Howard MacNutt, revised this to read:

He has ordained and established the House of Justice, which is endowed with a political as well as a religious function, the consummate union and blending of church and state. This institution is under the protecting power of Bahá’u’lláh Himself.

Thus the key phrase concerning “church and state” is a corruption of the text. The original continues:

A Universal or World House of Justice shall be organized. That which it orders shall be the Truth in explaining the Commands of Baha'o'llah, and that which the House of Justice ordains concerning the Commands of Baha'o'llah shall be obeyed by all.

Which MacNutt revises to read:

A universal, or international, House of Justice shall also be organized. Its rulings shall be in accordance with the commands and teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, and that which the Universal House of Justice ordains shall be obeyed by all mankind.

By removing the phrase “in explaining the Commands of Baha'o'llah,” MacNutt makes it appear that the Universal House of Justice has an unlimited authority, whereas the original says only that it has the authority to elucidate Bahá'í laws.

Howard MacNutt was taught the Faith in Ibrahim Kheirella's lessons, was appointed by him as the 'teacher' for New York, and remained close to him for some time after Kheirella had split with 'Abdu'l-Bahá and broken the Covenant.[46] Kheirella's views of Bahá'í teachings were theocratic, owing more to Christian eschatology than the Bahá'í scripture. From notes taken during Kheirella's lessons,[47] we know that Kheirella taught in his eleventh lesson that Bahá'u'lláh's Tablets to the Rulers called on the rulers “to throw their kingdoms at his feet.” In fact, it was only the Pope whom Bahá'u'lláh called upon to abandon his kingdom (and he was to pass it to the kings, not to Bahá'u'lláh). [48]

This suggests that at least one of the roots of theocratic belief in the Bahá'í community can be traced from Christian eschatology to Kheirella's teachings, through his Bahá'í students, and then—as a result of this remarkable exercise of editorial freedom by MacNutt—to an influential Bahá'í book. Once established as being 'a Bahá'í teaching,' the theocratic idea has been transmitted and sustained through deepenings and Bahá'í summer schools from which Bahá'í youth and new believers gain their understandings of the Faith (as illustrated, for example, in David Hofman's lectures on theocracy at the Maxwell Bahá'í School). [49]

I have made similar comparisons of the *Paris Talks* and *Star of the West* versions of other passages, in one case also with the Persian notes of the same talk. The same conclusions follow. These books should not be used except as handy references to locate the date of the talk in question, from which one can then locate the Persian notes (ideally) or the original notes of what the interpreter rendered of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá had said.[50] Any paper or book that uses either *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* or *Paris Talks* uncritically, as though these sources record the actual words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, is not a work of rigorous scholarship and should be dismissed in any serious study of Bahá'í law or teaching. But, this is relatively easy. What will be difficult is the eradication of the ideas that have spread in this way through the Bahá'í secondary literature and through what is taught in summer schools and discussed in local community deepenings. An evaluation of the extent to which the Bahá'í secondary literature has relied on weak texts is sobering. We



will have to question and revise a considerable part of what has been taken at a popular level in the Bahá'í community to be 'the Bahá'í teachings.'

## **Dispensationalism**

Dispensationalism is a strategy for resolving the contradictions that arise from a theocratic reading of Bahá'í scripture, if one supposes that all of the Bahá'í teachings about religious and civil governance refer to the same institutions. It is a way of explaining away the many passages found in the Bahá'í writings which emphatically endorse the civil state and the project of human governance, and dismissing the texts that condemn the involvement of the political order in matters of religion or vice versa. Dispensationalism allows the reader to regard the Bahá'í teachings on civil government and on the Bahá'í administrative order as referring to two consecutive stages in future development, rather than to two different things. In effect, a temporal separation of church and state takes the place of a constitutional separation of church and state.

John Hatcher's treatment, in *The Arc of Ascent* (1994), can serve as a fairly recent example of the way these stages are envisioned:

. . . for an indefinite period at the beginning of this process, the secular and sacred institutions will evolve separately . . . The final and complete stage in this process will occur when, through some process we can only imagine, the secular system of federated governance merges with the Bahá'í administrative order. This event will simultaneously signal the arrival of the Most Great Peace, the wedding of the bride with the bridegroom, the new heaven with the new earth, and the emergence of the Bahá'í Commonwealth as the Kingdom of God come on earth in all its plenitude.

Perhaps as piece by piece the secular system comes to appreciate and emulate ever more completely the systems and procedures of the Bahá'í administrative order, the distinction between the two will eventually become so nebulous that it will be seen as unnecessary to maintain two systems . . . Yet it is clear in the Bahá'í writings . . . that this convergence will not produce a third entity from the two distinct systems, nor will the Bahá'í institutions become subsumed by secular governance.[51]

One interesting feature here is that power is transferred from the political federation of states to the Bahá'í administrative order by a peaceful transition, rather than through an apocalyptic upheaval. But without an apocalyptic change, how is the transition to be achieved? And why would it be desirable in any case? The theocratic premise, that the "Kingdom of God ... on earth" must mean that government power is exercised by the Bahá'í administrative order, is not substantiated in any way. But the Bahá'í writings quite plainly speak of the need to build up institutions of world governance and of national governance, institutions that are not the same as the Bahá'í administrative order. Does it

make sense to build them up, if they are to be abolished?

In his book, Hatcher rejects two alternative ways of making the two systems one: the Bahá'í administrative institutions are not to be absorbed by the state, and the two are not to give way to a new creation. The third logical possibility is that the Bahá'í administrative institutions absorb the state, but Hatcher does not explore the implications of his line of reasoning. Nevertheless, if one concedes the premise that it is desirable for “the two systems to become one” (p. 282), this is all that remains, and we must suppose that this is what he intends us to deduce.

Hatcher himself touches on an alternative model when he uses the metaphor of the wedding of the bride and the bridegroom. But what happens after the wedding? The well-told story says that the couple lived together happily ever after, and not that one partner was swallowed by the other (unless the couple are praying manti!). There are forms of unity that do not require either that the parties become identical, or that one absorbs or imposes its will on the other. These forms of unity, known as ‘unity in diversity,’ ‘organic unity,’ ‘mystic union’ and, more simply, ‘love’ are expounded at length in the Bahá'í scriptures. Indeed, the Bahá'í revelation might be described as a midwife intended to aid the birth of social structures which transcend the unities of dominance and uniformity. On this point, Hatcher's Bahá'í world order model has been developed, not only without references to the Bahá'í writings, but also without referring to some of the finest and most characteristic of Bahá'í beliefs.

### **The Weakness of Dispensationalism**

The first thing we should note about dispensationalism is that it is a seductively easy strategy for the interpreter to adopt. Any texts that do not fit can simply be wished away by supposing that they refer to an earlier stage and are therefore not the real Bahá'í ideal. The real Bahá'í ideal is the idea already in the interpreter's mind. We can see how this works in Loni Bramson-Lerche's paper ‘An analysis of the Bahá'í World Order Model.’ She resolves some obvious contradictions in her model by dividing the period known as the Most Great Peace into one period governed by a world government characterized by a separation of powers (world legislature, executive, and judiciary), and a later period in which the Universal House of Justice is the supreme body. The way her interpretation is imposed onto the text is evident where she treats a well-known passage from Shoghi Effendi in *The Unfoldment of World Civilization* which begins:

The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth . . . This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature . . . [52]

In this passage, Shoghi Effendi envisions the institutions of world government and the glories of a world civilisation in an idyllic future when war has ended, hatred is no more, and the world's “life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its

allegiance to one common Revelation.” It does not contain any reference to the Universal House of Justice as a world government institution, or to National Spiritual Assemblies as national governments. Bramson Lerche solves this problem by introducing this passage as Shoghi Effendi’s “vision of a future Bahá’í world commonwealth, at least in its early stages.”[53] But, there is nothing in the passage cited to suggest an early stage is intended. On the contrary, Shoghi Effendi says that the model he describes is “the goal towards which humanity . . . is moving” and that the institutions he outlines are to be established “once for all.” The reference to early stages has been inserted to cover the gap between what Shoghi Effendi says and what the author proposes.

There is a similar clear use of the dispensationalist strategy in the 1980 edition of J. E. Esslemont’s *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era* (the fifth edition), in the section on “government.”[54] It should be noted that this section bears no resemblance to Esslemont’s original text or to his ideas. The whole passage is an editorial insertion, absent from the original text of the book. As such, it gives us a picture of what one group of Bahá’ís believed in the 1970s, when this edition was being prepared. Where Bramson-Lerche divides the Most Great Peace into two dispensations, the 1980 *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era* supposes that the change in the Bahá’í teachings regarding government coincides with the change from the Lesser to the Most Great Peace.

The second weakness in the dispensational type of argument is that it supposes that quite central Bahá’í teachings may change over time. An observer would have every reason to ask, if the principles concerning government can change as the Bahá’í community takes its place in the world, what about those concerning tolerance and the treatment of minorities, or the equality of men and women?

The answer is that such a change is impossible. We have seen in the passage cited from Hatcher’s *The Arc of Ascent* that he is unsure about how the world could move from the system of world federal government outlined in the Bahá’í writings to a system in which the Houses of Justice would take over the task of government. What would be the mechanism of transition? A coup is unthinkable, and even passive acceptance of a power “thrust upon them” is ruled out by Shoghi Effendi’s dictum that Bahá’ís must not “allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries.”[55] Apart from the mechanics of change, where would the authority for change come from? The principles regarding the right of civil government are embedded in the sacred texts, including both the *Kitáb-i Aqdas* and the *Kitáb-i ‘Ahd*, as well as the writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The details of the institutions of the world federal government are explained by Shoghi Effendi, whose interpretations become part of the sacred text. It is doctrinally impossible for any authority to arise within the Bahá’í community that could authorize us to abolish these institutions and change these principles, unless it be a new Manifestation of God. And that, according to Bahá’u’lláh will not happen “ere the expiration of a full thousand years.”

These problems apply to dispensationalist thinking in general, and not just to the question of church and state. Wherever we see an author using it, we should immediately suspect

that some element of the Bahá'í writings that does not fit the author's scheme is being swept under the rug of 'earlier stages.' However the illegitimate appeal to dispensationalist arguments should be distinguished from references to historical change as such. Shoghi Effendi for example refers to a historical process:

. . . which will carry the steadily evolving Faith of Bahá'u'lláh through its present stages of obscurity, of repression, of emancipation and of recognition . . . to the stage of establishment . . . 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* . . . a stage which . . . 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 . . .[56]

Some have suggested that the existence of stages beyond that of establishment of the Faith as a state religion implies that the principles of the church-state relationship may also change. In other words, that a "Bahá'í state" is necessarily a theocratic state.[57] But what is this assumption based upon? Shoghi Effendi has defined the Bahá'í state here as one that functions in accordance with the laws of the *Kitáb-i Aqdas*, and that book states:

[God] ordained you to be, for all time, the emblems of His sovereignty ...  
It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men. Upon them the eyes of Baha are fastened.  
To this testifieth the Kingdom of Names, could ye but comprehend it.[58]

The reference to the "Kingdom of Names" in the *Aqdas* passage indicates, I think, that this teaching reflects the innermost nature of the creation. I have already developed this line of argument in another article,[59] which also discusses the other references to kings, rulers, and democratic government in the *Aqdas*. Those arguments need not be repeated here. We can see that a theocratic state would be contrary to "the laws and ordinances of the *Kitáb-i Aqdas*," since the *Aqdas* endorses a civil state distinct from the religious order. Conversely, a Bahá'í state as Shoghi Effendi defines it could not be theocratic.

For the dispensationalist argument to be successful as a way of resolving a contradiction one must not only point to the existence of various stages, eras, and ages in the Bahá'í view of the future. One must also show that the relevant principle embodied in the initial state can be changed at the various subsequent stages, and furthermore demonstrate that the undesired outcome represents an earlier stage, and the desired outcome a later stage. The mere reference to stages of development is not helpful and explains nothing.

## **Two Sovereignties**

In the particular case of the differentiation of political and religious orders (the separation

of church and state), Bahá'u'lláh appears to have ruled out any change at all, even—it would seem—a change made by some future Manifestation of God. He writes:

Give a hearing ear, O people, to that which I, in truth, say unto you. 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 . . . [60]

Out of the whole world He hath chosen for Himself the hearts of men . . . Thus hath it been ordained by the Fingers of Bahá, upon the Tablet of God's *irrevocable decree* . . . [61]

Kings are the manifestations of the power . . . of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain. Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. This is a decree of God in this Most Great Revelation. It is divinely *preserved from annulment* and is invested by Him with the splendor of His confirmation.[62]

Bahá'u'lláh not only refers to irrevocability in several of the verses that provide the mandate for civil government, but also, in the first of the passages above, states that this has always been God's will. We can see that this is not simply hyperbole from his use of quranic and New Testament passages to support his argument in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*. The biblical passages he uses are too well-known to require a full citation: “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's” from the Gospels,[63] and two verses from Paul “. . . the powers that be are ordained of God,” and “For he [the ruler] is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.”[64] The verse from the Qur'an that Bahá'u'lláh uses is also a well known one: “Obey God and obey the Apostle, and those among you invested with authority.”[65]

It appears then that Bahá'u'lláh considers that the distinction between the authority of religion and of human governance has always been part of the ancient Faith of God. In that case, we should classify the doctrine of the two sovereignties not as one of the social teachings revealed for the Bahá'í era, but rather as an essential spiritual teaching that may be reformulated by future Manifestations of God but cannot be annulled. It is, as C. S. Lewis would say, part of the “deep magic,” a truth at the level of “God is Good,” “love

conquers all,” or “do unto others.”

## **The Challenge**

We have seen that much of the secondary Bahá'í literature has assumed that a theocratic model of governance is the Bahá'í ideal, and that it is not at all clear what arguments and scriptural texts underlie this idea. The simplest of the challenges that face us is to draw out the reasonings that have led many Bahá'ís over several generations to champion an idea which is not supported by their own scriptures, and to lay these arguments to rest. We must also suppose that there may be other substantial areas of the Bahá'í teachings that we are still misinterpreting. This calls for a sustained and critical review of all that we think we know, as a community, about the Bahá'í Faith and the shape of the Bahá'í community. We need to develop a habit of relating every claim about the Bahá'í teachings to authentic scriptural sources.

A second challenge is to revise our attitudes to politics and to government institutions in the light of Bahá'u'lláh's unequivocal endorsement of the claims of human governance. We are called to full citizenship of this world and the next. We are not only to “know and worship” God, but also to “carry forward an ever advancing civilization.”[66] Citizenship of this world involves duties that we cannot ethically leave to others. `Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

Thou hast asked regarding the political affairs. In the United States it is necessary that the citizens shall take part in elections. This is a necessary matter and no excuse from it is possible. My object in telling the believers that they should not interfere in the affairs of government is this: That they should not make any trouble and that they should not move against the opinion of the government, but obedience to the laws and the administration of the commonwealth is necessary. Now, as the government of America is a republican form of government, it is necessary that all the citizens shall take part in the elections of officers and take part in the affairs of the republic.[67]

We are called to be genuine well-wishers of government.[68] This requires much more than simply not disobeying its laws. It demands active, responsible, and spiritual participation. We cannot indulge in sneering at politics from the sidelines. Since democracies depend on broad participation for survival, a consistent refusal to participate is a passive subversion of the governing system. But participation presents a real challenge: how can we participate as believing individuals, while respecting the separation of the religious and political orders? Where can we participate without becoming involved in divisive partisanship that might do more harm than good?

For that matter, is the party-based approach to politics always unhealthy? Perhaps there is an analogy to healthy competition in the economic sphere: neither a partisan nor a competitive approach would be healthy in the religious sphere, but religion—as we have

seen—is not all. Since they are separate spheres, politics, commerce, science, and religion may function according to different principles, and the system of political parties may be appropriate in the political sphere, as a means of institutionalizing input from various interests in society. We have learned as Bahá'ís to participate in a competitive entrepreneurial economy, while being careful to keep the commercial affairs of individuals separate from our Bahá'í community life. We do not use the Feast to promote our sales schemes or careers, or at least we should not. We should also be able to keep our individual political involvement distinct from Bahá'í community life. If individuals use the Baha'í community as part of their network to mobilise support for the causes which they think are good, whether these are embodied in electoral parties or in worthy social and charitable organisations, community life will be disrupted. As a religious community, our 'core business' is the remembrance of God, in worship and in announcing God's message to the world. As individuals and citizens we also have a duty, in 'Abdu'l-Baha's words, to "take part in the affairs of the Republic."

Fortunately, we know that a democratic system depends at least as much on broad public participation in the institutions of civil society and non-partisan governmental institutions (quasi-non-governmental organisations and NGOs) as on participation in its party electoral system. We may concentrate for now on "civil society" politics, but these challenging questions will one day have to be addressed.

### **The Moral Weight of Theocratic Ideals**

Thus far, I have treated Bahá'í theocracy as if it were simply a structure of incorrect ideas or bad readings of particular texts, as if it were part of the conceptual structure of the Faith and did not affect our experience of Faith. But a greater challenge is, I think, for the Bahá'í community to examine itself—for example in the mirror of the secondary Bahá'í literature—and ask whether its adhesion to these ideas does not have a moral weight as well. For instance, when we come across John Robarts writing that "the Bahá'í spiritual assemblies will be the local government and the national spiritual assemblies the national government,"[69] what sort of emotional picture do we form of the future? Is there not a certain satisfaction in contemplating our own eventual triumph? A bolstering of our sense of self-importance? And the possibility, perhaps, of indulging in survivalist fantasies, in which Bahá'ís reconstruct a ruined world and start anew? The ideas that we have, even in our daydreams, help to shape the people we become: ideas have a moral significance.

The contemporary world is hard to understand: globalization, individualization, and the differentiation of social spheres (politics, economics, science, religion) mean that more is demanded of each of us. There are conflicting claims, and the only place they can be resolved is within "the spirit of the true believer," as Shoghi Effendi said.[70] Is the hope of an ultimate reversion to a simpler, undifferentiated, pre-modern society a psychological crutch? Has the Faith, which should be a path leading the peoples of the world into the postmodern era, been made instead into a refuge where the Bahá'ís can shelter themselves from its demands?

## Church and State in Contemporary Crises

Finally, and supposing that the other challenges can be met, the Bahá'ís face the challenge of bringing the Bahá'í teachings to the world. The relationship between the religious and political institutions of society is one of the oldest questions in human society. Yet it has taken particular and pressing forms in recent years, with divisive and even violent church-state conflicts in a variety of countries from Tibet to Algeria, Poland to Afghanistan.

The rise of political Islam in many countries has brought with it a questioning of whether the state, as a thing in itself, has any right to exist apart from the (true) religious community and its laws. The assertion that the separation of church and state has no justification in Islamic teaching is like a flag planted by Islamists to mark out the field on which the clash of civilizations will be fought. Few other doctrines can awaken such unanimous rejection among the inheritors of the 'Western' liberal tradition (in East and West). Thus the separation of church and state becomes a slogan and an emblem for deeper anxieties and wider hopes. It is not a technical question for the constitutional lawyers, but a touchstone for how we see ourselves and how we view the world. It has often taken the form of a struggle between parties with differing visions of the nation and its future: Islamists versus the governments of Islamic countries, or Nativists versus globalizing elites. But this is not primarily a struggle between parties and factions, it is an historic struggle for an understanding wide enough to embrace the religious and the political aspects of our own natures.

For those who consider religion a superstitious vestigial organ, the problem of church and state is external. But for the believer, it is an intimate dilemma and, if it is not resolved, a pain in the heart. How can we say, as we must: 'Sovereignty is God's,' and not say: 'Therefore politics, science, and economics fall under the control of religion'? The solution that I have found in the Bahá'í writings may be of interest to all believers, of whatever faith. For I think it shows that adherence to fundamental values derived from religion and faith does not entail a denial of the prerogatives of the state, of the dignity of statecraft, and of our duties to both. It is indeed possible to be a citizen of the city of God and of a modern nation too, providing one can establish that God so wills it. The question is how we can take this gift of Bahá'u'lláh to the world.

One of the attractions of Bahá'u'lláh's model to me is that it is beautiful—a dance of complementary pairs, rather than the totalitarianism of monist models or the artificiality of those secular models that seek to rule religion and culture out of the public sphere. If aesthetics is a valid argument in mathematics, it may certainly be admitted in theology. And if Bahá'ís were really to teach and explain this model to the world, perhaps its beauty would attract those who are torn between the unattractive option of a state that denies a role for faith, on the one hand, and the fear of a decline into theocracy on the other. Religion and the state can only be reconciled if they recognize and respect one another. While many states appear willing to enter into a partnership with organized religion where they consider it safe to do so, the Bahá'í Faith is the only religion I know of which has the



unambiguous theological underpinnings that would enable religion to recognize the state as an expression of its own fundamental and unchangeable religious principles.

## Notes

1. Bahá'u'lláh, Lawh-i Ashraf, in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, translated by Shoghi Effendi, second revised edition (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939, 1976) section CII, pp. 206-7.
2. Unpublished, but available at [www.bahailibrary.org/unpubl.articles/church.html](http://www.bahailibrary.org/unpubl.articles/church.html). A Dutch translation was published in *Vizier* 34.5/6 (1995) and 35.1/2 (1996).
3. Theocracy is used in the specific sense of government by religious bodies.
4. See the bibliography. The Bahá'í literature available to me in the Netherlands is limited, but I believe the sample is fairly representative.
5. This last saving clause refers primarily to the various versions of Esslemont's *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, which form an interesting study in themselves but have not been dealt with here for reasons of brevity.
6. See H-Bahai Reviews at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/reviews/modrev.htm>; and *Iranian Studies* 32:4 1999 580-582.
7. Sprung, Christopher, 'Baha'i Institutions and Human Governance' in *Law and International Order: Proceedings of the First European Baha'i Conference on Law and International Order, De Poort, the Netherlands*. London, Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1996 pp. 154-5.
8. *Directives of the Guardian*. Compiled by Gertrude Garrida (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1973) pp. 78-79.
9. *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974) p. 321. Emphasis added.
10. Cf. *The Bahá'í World 1954-1963*, vol. 13 (Haifa: The Universal House of Justice, 1970) pp. 292-96. Fischer, Michael M.J. *Iran: from religious dispute to revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). See pp. 186-7 and p. 275, note 16, citing *New York Times*, July 10, 1956, and July 17, 1956, p.3; and the Tehran daily *Keyhan* (17 Mordad 1334/1956) p. 70.
11. Francesco Ficicchia, *Der Baha'ismus, Weltreligion der Zukunft?* (Stuttgart: Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen, 1981). See 'theokratie' in the index.  
D. MacEoin (under pseudonym of Daniel Easterman), *New Jerusalem's, Reflections on Islam, fundamentalism and the Rushdie affair* (London: Harper Collins, 1992), see p. 184.  
William McElwee Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its history and teachings* (South Pasadena, Calif.: William Carey Library, 1974). See e.g. pp. 160, 290.  
Sayyid Ali Raza Naqavi, 'Bábism and Bahá'ism: A study of their history and doctrines' *Islamic Studies* XIV.3 (1975) pp. 185-217, see especially pp. 205, 212.  
Margit Warburg, 'Baha'i: A Religious Approach to Globalization,' *Social Compass* 26.1 (1999) pp. 47-56.
12. *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, second revised edition 1974), pp. 6-7. Punctuation has been altered to match Shoghi

- Effendi's manuscript.
13. See, e.g., John Hatcher's treatment, in *The Arc of Ascent* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1994) pp. 281-2.
  14. *The Law of Love Enshrined: Selected Essays* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1996) p. 176.
  15. I think there are few if any in the Bahá'í community who have worked out and committed themselves to a theocratic theory of government. This is not unusual: the general population has very little idea of what economics and the economy is, or what politics and government is and how it works, as we can see from a series of movements ranging from anarchism and the "do away with money" idealism of the 1960s to the anti-globalisation riots and fuel price blockades of recent times.
  16. Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1966 edn. p. 12, 1984 edn. p. 14. See also, *God Passes By*, Ch.24.
  17. *Messages to the Bahá'í World, 1950-1957* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1958[1971]) p. 155.
  18. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i Íqán* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989) pp. 107-108.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
  20. Translated in Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980) p. 20.
  21. *Gleanings*, section CXVI, p. 247.
  22. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i Aqdas* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992) extracts from paragraphs 78 to 83.
  23. Paragraphs 88 and 91-93 respectively.
  24. Extract translated in Shoghi Effendi, *Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978) p. 85.
  25. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, revealed after the Kitáb-i Aqdas*, translated by Habib Taherzadeh (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978) pp. 92-93.
  26. Translated by Shoghi Effendi, revised edition (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979) pp. 89-92, see also pp. 30-31, 33, 104, 137.
  27. *Gleanings*, CX, pp. 215-16.
  28. For example in a letter to Nabil-i A'zam, in *Gleanings*, CXXXIX, p. 304; Lawh-i Dhabih, in *Gleanings*, CXV, pp. 241-42; Kitáb-i 'Ahd, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 220-21.
  29. Undated passage translated in Cole, *Modernity and the Millenium* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) p. 35, citing Iqtidarát va chand Lawh-i Digar, Tehran, n.d. A similar denial of any claim to world domination is found in the Tablet to Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, published in *The Bahá'í World 1930-1932*, Vol. 4, p. 103, and in E. G. Browne, *A Traveller's Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975 [reprint]) p. 396.
  30. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* pp. 220-21. The relevant passage is included by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in his "Treatise on Leadership" and is cited below.
  31. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Risálih-ye Siyasiyyah* (Treatise on Leadership, La Politique), Persian text with English and French translations by Juan Cole and Hippolyte Dreyfus respectively. See <http://h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/trans.htm>. (Translations of

- Shayhki, Babi and Bahai Texts, Volume 2, 1998)
32. Regarding the separation of church and state, in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, pocket-sized edition 1990), the point made at p. 37 concerning the 'two potent forces' that uphold the state is obscured by the translation. The Persian is on p. 44 of the *Risáleh-yi Madiniyyih* (Bahá'í-Verlag, 1984). The meaning of these 'two forces' is explained at length by `Abdu'l-Bahá in his *Risáleh-yi Siyasiyyah*, (see the previous note) from which it is clear that what is translated here as 'the legislative' (*tashriyy`ah*) refers to the function of the religious order in propagating and explaining the significance of religious law, while 'the executive power' (*tanfidhiyyah*) refers to the function of government as such, and not simply to the executive as one arm of government in Western democracies. `Abdu'l-Bahá also refers to these 'two forces' in his *Will and Testament* (U.S., 1990 reprint, p. 15), where the parallelism makes it clear that by *tashriyy`ah*, in the Bahá'í case, he means the Universal House of Justice, and by *tanfidhiyyah* he means the government. In *A Traveller's Narrative* `Abdu'l-Bahá states that the Bahá'ís "have no worldly object nor any concern with political matters. [Their aim]... is restricted to spiritual things and confined to matters of conscience; it has nothing to do with the affairs of government..." (U.S., 1980 edition, p. 86).
- Regarding the complementary principle, that government should not interfere with the "consciences and beliefs of peoples," see for example *A Traveller's Narrative* pp. 89-92.
33. Here Cole cites the published translation of the Kitáb-i 'Ahd in *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 220-21.
34. *Will and Testament*, pp. 14-15.
35. We have details on the methods of election of the tribunal, the Universal House of Justice and the World Legislature, from which it is clear that these cannot be the same institutions.

As for the tribunal, when `Abdu'l-Bahá wrote to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at The Hague in 1919 he said "that the national assemblies of each country and nation -- that is to say parliaments -- should elect two or three persons ... The number of these representatives should be in proportion to the number of inhabitants of that country. The election of these souls who are chosen by the national assembly, that is, the parliament, must be confirmed by the upper house, the congress and the cabinet and also by the president or monarch so these persons may be the elected ones of all the nation and the government. The Supreme Tribunal will be composed of these people, and all mankind will thus have a share therein, for every one of these delegates is fully representative of his nation ..." (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 306, except that I have used the revised translation of this Tablet from the World Centre in 1985, in which 'men' has been changed to 'persons'.)

As for the legislature, Shoghi Effendi has said that the members of the legislature should be "elected by the people in their respective countries and whose election shall be confirmed by their respective governments". (*The World Order of*

*Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 40-41.) However Bahá'u'lláh says, in respect to the gathering which is to establish (and presumably maintain) world peace, that it would be “preferable and more fitting that the highly-honored kings themselves should attend such an assembly.” (*Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 31.) This looks rather like a two-chamber structure, with one chamber elected directly by the people and the other consisting of government representatives.

Regarding the election of the National Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice, on p. 84 of *Bahá'í Administration* (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974 edition), Shoghi Effendi writes:

Regarding the method to be adopted for the election of the National Spiritual Assemblies .... In one of His earliest Tablets ... addressed to a friend in Persia, the following is expressly recorded:- “At whatever time all the beloved of God in each country appoint their delegates, and these in turn elect their representatives, and these representatives elect a body, that body shall be regarded as the Supreme Baytu'l-'Adl (Universal House of Justice).” These words clearly indicate that a three-stage election has been provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá for the formation of the International House of Justice, and as it is explicitly provided in His *Will and Testament* that the “Secondary House of Justice (i.e., National Assemblies) must elect the members of the Universal One,” it is obvious that the members of the National Spiritual Assemblies will have to be indirectly elected by the body of the believers in their respective provinces.

36. On 31 January 2001. Archives are available (Talisman9-subscribe@onelist.com).
37. *Bahá'í Administration* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928) p. 147 (1974 edn., p. 149).
38. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 66.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 204
40. *'Abdu'l-Bahá: the Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, Compiled by Howard MacNutt, Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982 (first edition 1922-1925) p. 455.
41. In Charles Lerche (ed.), *Emergence, Dimensions of a New World Order*, (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) see p. 40.
42. Letter dated 30 August 1955, published in *Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith to the Bahá'ís of the British Isles* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981) p. 357.
43. *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 90.
44. *Unfolding Destiny*, p. 208.
45. *Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. xx.
46. Stockman, R., *The Bahá'í Faith in America*, vol. 1 (Bahá'í Publishing Trust: Wilmette, 1985) pp. 125, 177. So far as I know, MacNutt had broken off contact with Kheirella long before the early 1920s, when he would have been editing the third part of *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. There is no suggestion that the two were working in concert, simply that the ideas MacNutt inserts here are a logical extension of the teachings he had first learned from Kheirella two decades

- earlier.
47. Browne, E.G., *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion* (Cambridge University Press, 1918) p. 138.
  48. *The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 85.
  49. Available on tape from Live Unity Productions, 23 Toronto St., Toronto, Ontario; www.liveunity.org.
  50. Two exceptions can be noted, and there may well be others: each section of these books must be treated skeptically, but on its own merits. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, the talk beginning on p. 44 has been retranslated by Amin Banani from the Persian notes for the 1982 edition. Although it remains a report, the fact that the notes were taken in Persian and that the text has not been subjected to MacNutt's editing gives it a high degree of authenticity. In *Paris Talks*, there is one section beginning on p. 182 in which the original is a tablet written by `Abdu'l-Bahá rather than a talk. The original in this case is authentic Bahá'í scripture, but the version in *Paris Talks* is a free interpretation of this by an editor, and has caused considerable misunderstanding in the community. The original English translation in this case is published in M.A. Sohrab, *`Abdu'l-Bahá in Egypt*, New York, New History Foundation, 1929, p. 249 (Although Sohrab later became a covenant-breaker, this book was "approved by the Publishing Committee of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada").
  51. *The Arc of Ascent*, pp. 281-2.
  52. *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 203-04
  53. L. Bramson-Lerche, "An analysis," p. 35, emphasis added.
  54. Pages 135-37.
  55. It has been suggested to me that this dictum does not apply indefinitely, but only "while" the Bahá'ís are "endeavoring to conduct and perfect the administrative affairs of their Faith" (see the passage from *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* quoted above), and that this might be the basis of dispensationalist views. I have not seen any further explanation of when or why, according to this line of argument, the Bahá'ís might at some future date cease to "conduct and perfect the administrative affairs of their Faith," so those supporting this reading may have further arguments which need to be considered.
  56. Shoghi Effendi, *Messages to the Bahá'í World*, p. 155.
  57. These are the comments of the anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this paper.
  58. Paragraphs 82-83; see also K78-83, 88, 91-93.
  59. "A theology of the state from the Bahá'í writings," *Journal of Church and State*, Vol. 41 (1999) pp. 697-724.
  60. *Gleanings*, CII. Emphasis added.
  61. *Gleanings*, CXXX, p. 279.
  62. Kitáb-i `Ahd, in *Tablets of Baha'u'lláh*, pp. 220-21.
  63. Matthew 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26.
  64. Romans 13:1 and 13:4.
  65. Surah 4:62.
  66. *Gleanings*, CIX.

67. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1909, 1930; 3 volumes with consecutive page numbering) pp. 342-43.
68. *Gleanings, XLIII; Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) pp. 122, 137; etc.
69. John Roberts in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi: Proceedings of the Association for Bahá'í Studies ninth annual conference, November 2-4, 1984* (Ottawa: Association for Bahá'í Studies, 1993) p. 174.
70. *Bahá'í Administration* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928) pp. 63-64.

## Bibliography

An annotated bibliography of references relevant to the issue of church and state in Bahá'í secondary literature

Bausani, Alesandro, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second edition, article on 'Bahais', 1958. This reference is discussed in the text of this essay.

Bramson-Lerche, Loni, 'An analysis of the Bahá'í World Order Model', in Charles Lerche (ed.) *Emergence, Dimensions of a New World Order* (London, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991) pp. 1-70. See my review published in *The Bahá'í Studies Review*, vol. 3 no. 1, 1993.

Cole, J. R I., 'Iranian Millenarianism and Democratic Thought in the 19th Century,' *Int. J. Middle East Stud.* 24 (1992), and *Modernity and the Millennium: the Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1998.

Dreyfus, Hippolyte. *Essai sur le Bahá'isme; Son Histoire, Sa Portée Sociale*, 1st edition, 1909; 3rd edition, revised and enlarged (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 1962). See 1909 edition, p. 55. This may be one of the more influential of the works discussed, since it was translated into English. Dreyfus begins his chapter on the Bahá'í Faith and the State by saying that "The separation of church and state can only be temporary—a momentary stage in the march of societies" (p. 55, translation as cited by Rabbani, 1940, p. 5), but what he means is not that the state and religious orders will be collapsed into one 'machinery', but that "the state will be religious; not that it must give to all its acts a mystical appearance, which could not be in keeping with their material object ... But religion being put into practice in all acts of life, from the minister of state down to the humblest official, each one will be penetrated by the sacred character of his responsibility . . ." (ibid). Dreyfus is writing quite particularly out of the situation in France at that time, when the widespread Roman Catholic support for the royalist cause on the one hand, and anti-clerical feeling and a positivist philosophy among the leaders of the Third Republic on the other hand, had led to an extreme distrust of the political motives of French Catholics, to the extent of excluding practicing Roman Catholics from

senior posts in key ministries. The 'separation of church and state', especially in the Combes government of 1902-1905, had almost come to mean that state institutions could not in any way accommodate either belief or believers. Dreyfus is not saying that societies will eventually revert to the situation in which church and state were not separate organs, or to a situation in which the prince decides and supervises the religion of his subjects. Rather he is saying that irreligion in public life is a side-effect of a particular stage in the evolution of the state, at which the state and religious orders must differentiate themselves one from another to make the development of the modern state possible, and to ensure freedom of conscience.

Esslemont, J.E. *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* first publication in 1923. Fifth revised edition (Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980, reprinted 1990) pp. 135-37. This section is entirely different to Esslemont's original and its ideas should not be attributed to him. Brief, vague and incoherent, this is nevertheless the most extensive and best grounded presentation of Bahá'í political teachings available in the current Bahá'í secondary literature. Unusually, it cites scriptural texts, but this has not been treated as a presentation of the scriptural basis for theocracy, because the reasoning by which the authors have proceeded from the texts to their conclusions is unclear.

Hatcher, J., *The Arc of Ascent: The Purpose of Physical Reality II* (Oxford, George Ronald, 1994) pp. 281-82: A dispensationalist approach, which having described the Bahá'í administrative institutions and the institutions of world federal government, then envisions that "The final and complete stage in this process will occur when, through some process we can only imagine, the secular system of federated governance merges with the Bahá'í administrative order." No references are provided.

Hatcher, J.S and Hatcher, William S., *The Law of Love Enshrined: Selected Essays* (Oxford, George Ronald, 1996). Refers in passing to "a spiritually based society, essentially theocratic in form", as if the two are necessarily synonymous.

Hofman, David: *Commentary on the Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, 1943, Fourth revised edn., (Oxford, George Ronald, 1982) pp. 10-11. Hofman uses the term theocracy, but it is not clear from this passage whether he means a godly society, or a religious order that rules the state.

Hofman, David: *The Renewal of Civilization*, revised edition (Oxford, George Ronald, 1945, 1972) see Chapter 8. One interesting aspect of this chapter is that Hofman identifies Christ's saying "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" as underlying the separation of church and state in Christian history and theory (which he calls a 'schism', "from which Christendom has never recovered.") He seems unaware that this is precisely the biblical verse that Bahá'u'lláh, in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (89-90) used and endorsed in

upholding the theological legitimacy of the authority of the Sháh and other rulers. This endorsement in turn was cited by `Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi in works that Hofman would certainly have known (e.g., in *The Promised Day Is Come*, p. 71.) Moreover, Hofman claims that “in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh there is no cleavage between religion and other human activities . . . there is no professional priesthood and no professional politics . . . “ (pages 121-2) although both Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá do in fact assume that there will be professional politicians, from Kings and heads of state to ministers and representatives of the people, and have written extensively to them and about them. This book has been widely used in the Baha'i community: the passage I quoted comes from the fourth edition and at least the ninth reprinting. Each of the editions has presumably been approved by literature review boards. This suggests that Baha'u'llah's teachings, which endorse the principle of “render unto Caesar” and the high rank and special responsibilities of “kings and rulers,” have not been widely accepted in the Baha'i community.

Holley, Horace, introduction to Shoghi Effendi's *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, and *Religion for Mankind*, Oxford, George Ronald, 1956, 1976). In the first of these, Holley claims (page vii) that 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 Bahá'u'lláh. But Holley cannot have been ignorant of Bahá'u'lláh's citation and endorsement of this verse in *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf* (pp. 89-90).

Huddleston, John, *The Search for a Just Society* (Oxford, George Ronald, 1989). The Bahá'í administrative order is referred to as an ‘alternative system of government’ (pp. 425, 426) which is to replace obsolete democratic institutions (pp. 425, 448) in a peaceful transition. He does not explain how he can interpret the development of democracy as one of the main steps towards ‘a just society’ in his historical section, and call for a union of “progressive forces” who are committed to “a free society with a democratic form of government” (pp. 396, 399), while also advocating the abandonment of democracy in the future.

Kheiralla, Ibrahim, ‘Early lessons in America’, printed by Browne in *Materials for the Study of the Bábí Religion*, (Cambridge, 1918), see especially the eleventh lesson. Kheiralla had a limited knowledge of Bahá'í writings and teachings, and draws mainly on millennialist readings of Biblical passages.

Moayed, Vafa, ‘La separation des pouvoirs spirituel et temporel: une formule provisoire?’ in *Valeurs Religieuses, Valeurs Laïques: Recherche d'une Éthique Universelle*, (Switzerland, Association Européenne Francophone pour les études Bahá'ies (Recueil des conférences), 1988). Although the entire article is devoted to the church and state question, it tells us little about why some Bahá'is have believed in a theocratic order. He seems uncertain himself (page 55). Moayed writes exclusively from a contemporary French perspective. By ‘separation’ he means



‘separation as it is in France now’, and so naturally concludes that this is a French phenomenon and a ‘provisional formula.’ He further says that “in a Bahá’í society, the domination of the spiritual over the temporal would be permanent and absolute . . . The Bahá’í Faith has a monist conception of human society.” But nothing could be further from the truth: the Bahá’í writings present us with an organic conception of human society. The inadequacy of Moayed’s paper reinforces the point made by Sprung, that the question of the Bahá’í attitude to the church-state relationship cannot be approached without first turning to the Bahá’í writings to form a clear idea of the theology of the state, and indeed of human society.

Rabbani, Hussein, ‘The Church and the World,’ *World Order* 3:415--424, 1938, especially page 419, and ‘Religion and Society: a unified society requires elimination of conflict between church and state,’ *World Order*, 6:1940, pp. 1-8. In the first of these articles he recognizes that ours is a “highly ... complicated social order,” compared to that in which Jesus appeared (p. 421), but he nevertheless supposes that there cannot be more than one source of authority in modern society, and this should be “a Church which seeks to establish upon earth the Government of God, and thus usher in His Divine Kingdom.” This ‘Church’, it emerges, is the Bahá’í Administrative Order. Two years later he again addresses the issue. He mentions views such as his own previous views and also other views “that church and state—both being essential and divine in character—should stand on an equal basis.” (p. 1) Since Hussein Rabbani was based in Haifa, and since the latter view is an accurate summary of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings as translated in *Gleanings*, one wonders whether Rabbani might have been discussing the question with his brother, Shoghi Effendi, in the intervening two years. If so, the discussions did not entirely convince him, because he declines to “enter into a detailed study of these different theories.”

Remey, Charles, ‘The Bahá’í Teachings Regarding Worship’ (1925), in *A series of twelve articles introductory . . .*, (New York, Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1925) pp. 113-120. Remey does not argue for a theocratic model, but for a pious society, involving “not a union of church and State, but a union of religion and State.” It is noteworthy that Remey’s pamphlet was published in the same year as Howard MacNutt published his claim that the Universal House of Justice represents “the consummate union and blending of church and state.” For other works of Remey on this topic see Chapter 8 of his *The Bahá’í Movement*, 1912 and his 1908 pamphlet, *The Message of Unity*.

Robarts, John in *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi: Proceedings of the Association for Bahá’í Studies Ninth Annual Conference, November 2-4, 1984* (Ottawa, Association for Bahá’í Studies, 1993). Robarts says that “the Bahá’í spiritual assemblies will be the local government and the national spiritual assemblies the national government,” (p. 174). He bases himself here on his own shorthand notes of remarks made to him by Shoghi Effendi in 1955, but the words contradict what Shoghi Effendi had written in 1932: “Theirs is not the purpose, . . . to allow the

machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries. (*The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 66).

Ruhe, David, 'Religion for adults,' *World Order* 14:8, 1948, pp. 253-257. Ruhe claims that the Bahá'í Faith "declares the need for fusion of church and state without equivocation" but does not provide any evidence that this is so.

Saiedi, Nader, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, University Press of Maryland, 2000. Saiedi rejects theocratism, and the American model of a complete separation of church and state (p. 361), which he sometimes calls 'modern' and 'Western' rather than American. He also conflates the American model with "the complete separation of religion from public life", which is clearly incorrect. His model of the church-state relationship is of two "relatively autonomous" spheres that "constitute an organic, cooperative and interactive unity." (p. 364) Bahá'u'lláh, he says, called for the "interaction and cooperation of religious and political authorities." (p. 364) He presents some of the passages from the writings of Bahá'u'lláh that I have cited in the main text, and concludes "there is a contrast between dominion in the realm of the heart and dominion in the realm of the earth. The former is the sole interest of God and His Manifestation, while the latter has been entrusted to the kings and rulers of the world." (p. 367) As a presentation of Bahá'í teachings on church and state this is accurate and scripturally based. It is marred by the terminological confusions just mentioned and his habit of presenting his reading of Bahá'í teachings as a contrast to Cole's work (they are in fact almost identical) and in contrast to other social and political philosophies, using simplistic characterisations. The reader must be prepared to look past the polemical use of straw man arguments to those sections in which Saiedi engages with Bahá'u'lláh's own thought.

Sala, Emeric, 'New hope for minority peoples,' *World Order* 12:8, December 1946, see pp. 267-688. Although it is not stated, it seems clear that Sala is assuming that the Bahá'í administrative order is also to be the temporal government of a Bahá'í state. He transfers the principles which govern the election and operation of the Bahá'í administrative order to the political order.

Shook, G.A., 'A Divine Administrative Order,' (section V of 'Youth in the Modern World'), *World Order* 12:6, 1946, pp. 180-185, especially pp. 181--3. A circular approach, gliding from a discussion of church government, where Shook has shown the Bahá'í model to be different from Christian models, to government *per se*, which his argument has not addressed at all. It appears, in fact, that it has not occurred to Shook that these might be two different things, either in the Christian past or in the future.

Sprung, Christopher, 'Bahá'í Institutions and Human Governance' in *Law and International Order* (London, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996). While he declines to come to any conclusions, Sprung's essay is useful in several respects. It

recognizes that the church-state relationship in the Bahá'í world order model cannot be separated from the theology of the state in the Bahá'í writings, and it argues with reference to the Bahá'í writings. While he does not cite any of the many passages in Bahá'í scripture which mandate the civil state, this seems not to be a deliberate bias, since he does not use the absence of these texts to promote the contrary (theocratic) thesis. It seems more likely that the author was not familiar with the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá on politics. Note that the statement concerning the separation of church and state which Sprung has quoted on pp. 158—159 is not from the Guardian, as he claims there. In note 5 p. 164 Sprung correctly attributes this passage to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States (1937), but then claims that it was approved by the Guardian in 1935. From the dates, and the fact that the 1937 NSA statement cites the 1935 letter from the Guardian, this is impossible. He also relies, with some reservations, on the words “consummate blending of church and state” attributed to `Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, which have been discussed in the main text. Sprung does not define the term ‘Commonwealth’, which he seems to think is a sort of state but refers to at one point (p. 159) as a ‘world society’.

Taherzadeh, Adib, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* (Oxford, George Ronald, 4 volumes, 1974, 1975) see volume 3, p. 314. This is a dispensationalist approach, in which the world federal system is only an interim stage pending the maturation of the Faith. However Shoghi Effendi, in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, provides a vision of the world federal machinery which does not include the Universal House of Justice, and which he says must be established “once for all” (p. 202).

Townshend, George. *Christ and Bahá'u'lláh* (London: George Ronald, 1957 edition) pp. 100-01. For Townshend, Shoghi Effendi is “the nearest approach on earth to the Divine exaltation” and fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah 9 verse 6: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.” The relevant passage has been changed in later editions of the book.