

Contents, Forward and Introduction to:

CHURCH AND STATE

*Book 1 of a postmodern political theology
for the Bahai community*

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STUDIES IN THE BÁBÍ AND BAHÁ'Í RELIGIONS

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*R*emove the veils from mine eyes, O my Lord,
that I may recognize what Thou hast desired for Thy creatures.

(Prayers and Meditations of Baha'u'llah 215)

This book is dedicated
to the community of the Remembrance of God,
wherever they may be.

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Foreword

This book presents my own understanding of the Bahai¹ teachings on some issues that are now critically important to the Bahai community and its relations with the world. My approach has been enriched by my Christian background and education, my studies of theology and church history at Knox Theological Hall and Holy Cross Seminary in Dunedin, New Zealand, and studies of Persian and Islamic Studies at Leiden University, in the Netherlands.

I should declare at the outset that my stance is not that of a historian or academic scholar of the science of religion, but of a Bahai theologian, writing from and for a religious community, and I speak as if the reader shares the concerns of that community. As a Bahai theologian, I seek to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahai community, to enable Bahais to understand their relatively new faith and to see what it can offer the world. The approach is not value-free. I would be delighted if the Bahai Faith proved to have a synergy with post-modernity, if it prospered in the coming decades and had an influence on the world. The reader who is used to academic studies of religion that avoid such value judgements will have to make the necessary adjustments here and there. I do not however write as an apologist: the goal is a serious study that can aid the Bahai community and others to discover the potential for contemporary religious life which lies within the Bahai scriptures, rather than simply to repackage the Bahai Faith in a palatable form for present needs.

I should also say that I place myself somewhere towards the progressive end of the contemporary Bahai spectrum, in other words, that I feel quite at home in a differentiated, pluralistic, individualistic and globally integrating world, and I hope and expect to see post-modern society prosper. At the other end of the spectrum, there is a very different Bahai discourse which regards a postmodern society as a non-viable option since – according to traditionalist ideas of a ‘what society is’ – differentiation and individualism are symptoms of the disintegration of society. Rather than looking forward to an unpredictable synergy with postmodernism, a really *new* world order, the conservative Bahai discourse hopes to re-establish a society in the traditional sense, once the progressive disintegration of society, as they perceive it, has run its course. The reader should be aware, then, that this is only one among the competing discourses within the contemporary western Bahai community.

Since this book is a reexamination of the Bahai teachings that are relevant to

¹ See the preceding ‘Note on transliterations.’ The anglicised pronunciation is Bahai (rhyming with ‘eye’); the pronunciation guide according to the system applied to other Persian and Arabic words is *Bahā’ī*.

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the art of politics in its broadest sense, I presume some knowledge of previous interpretations of the Bahai writings, of the central figures of the Bahai Faith, and the institutions of the Bahai community. A list of introductory and reference works on the Bahai Faith is provided at the end of the book.

As a theologian rather than a political scientist I am interested in principles rather than political mechanisms or history, and particularly in how those principles relate to the nature of the Kingdom and ultimately to the nature of God. Topical applications of these principles are a separate question. The theological principles will undoubtedly need to be supplemented from both practical experience and detailed historical research. It is to be hoped that my intellectual and spiritual debts, and my leaning towards theological rather than historical analysis, have been the source of selective enrichment, rather than bias. The reader is, at any rate, forewarned.

The views offered here are not an authoritative view of the Bahai teachings, nor a definitive statement of my own views on these topics. These are samples from a work in progress, born out of an ongoing argument with myself. It is published now rather than at some other time partly because I have achieved a degree of certainty that at least the broad lines of these ideas do accurately represent the Bahai teachings, but chiefly because the issues dealt with here have become so pressing for the well-being of the Bahai communities in the west, and offer such potential for fruitful dialogue with the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, that a start must be made.

The present volume has been self-published as part of the requirements for a Master's degree, and would in several respects be different if it was a more formal and market-oriented publication. The extensive literature review in the fifth chapter is *de rigueur* for a dissertation, but can hardly be made thrilling reading. The general reference system for the Bahai scriptures and the writings of Shoghi Effendi, using paragraph numbers rather than page numbers, was being introduced during the writing, but has not been used, although it is desirable that it should be speedily adopted for all academic work. The editions of Bahai scriptures cited are those I happen to have, not the first or most recent or most widely used. Primary sources in translation have generally been checked against the originals, but not in every case, and not at all in the case of the Bible. Time has not allowed a proper treatment of the church-state relationship in the late Ottoman empire, which is probably as relevant as the relationship in Shiah (*Shī'a*) Iran, an adequate treatment of Jewish or Christian political theologies, or a proper comparison with the ideas of contemporary Islamic modernists.

The title 'church and state' will appear strange to most Bahai readers, since the Bahai faith is an independent religion born from Shiah Islam, not a church. However

‘church and state studies’ is the accepted name of a field of study which is not confined to Christianity. There is, for example, a *Journal of Church and State*, and research schools on the topic. These deal with the general issue of the relationship between organised religion and the institutional part of political life, while placing both of these within the vague field of less organised life (religiosity and civil society) and relating them to other disciplines such as law and sociology. As we will see, much of what Baha’u’llah (*Bahā’u’llāh*) and Abdu’l-Baha (*‘Abdu’l-Bahā*) teach on the issue is not specific to the Bahai Faith, but refers to the role of religion, religions, or leaders of religion in general. So ‘church and state’ is the best term available, just because it has become universalised. It is also Effendi’s choice, when observing Shiah Iran:

... in the slow and hidden process of secularization ... a discerning eye can easily discover the symptoms that augur well for a future that is sure to witness the formal and complete separation of Church and State.²

A second reason for using the term ‘church’ is that there is no ready word available for the Bahai equivalent of ‘church,’ because Bahais, unlike Christians, have multiple religious institutions that are specialised to different functions. If I use the term ‘House of Justice’ I have left out the appointed institutions, if I talk of the ‘Administrative Order’ I have still left out the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar (*Mashriqu’l-Adhkār*), and by doing so I might overlook important questions. Does the interface between the religious order and the political order in the Bahai model of society pass primarily through the House of Justice, or the Administrative Order including the appointed institutions? Or through the Mashriqu’l-Adhkar and its dependencies? Or all of these? The use of the admittedly inapplicable word ‘church’ for all of the structures of the Bahai community leaves these questions open.

My thanks are due to the editors of journals and books in which earlier versions of some of the chapters have been published (see the bibliography) and to the members of a number of email discussion groups, especially *Talisman*, who have provided valuable information and feedback on many sections. The translation of Abdu’l-Baha’s *Risalih-ye Siyasiyyah* was first published electronically in *Translations of Shaykhi, Babi and Baha’i Texts*, vol. 7, no. 1 (March, 2003).³ I have been assisted by many members of staff in the Faculty of Theology and the

² *Baha’i Administration* 147.

³ <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/trans/vol7/govern.htm>

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Department of Languages and Cultures of the Islamic Middle East at Leiden University, and particularly by my graduation supervisor, Professor J. ter Haar of the Persian department. Thanks are also due to Dr. A.H. de Groot, who commented on drafts of some sections, and to Asghar Seyed-Gohrab for his assistance in collating the two manuscripts of the *Risalih-ye Siyasiyyah* (Abdu'l-Baha's *Sermon on the Art of Governance*) and in polishing its translation. Steve Cooney helped in identifying many of the sources in the secondary Bahai literature mentioned in the survey of church and state in the Bahai secondary literature.

Finally, the greatest debt of all is due to my wife Sonja, who through many years has shared and sustained my conviction that the issues warrant the effort required to address them.



*The All-Knowing Physician
hath His finger on the pulse of mankind.
He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the
remedy. Every age hath its own problem, and every soul its particular
aspiration. The remedy the world needeth in its present-day afflictions
can never be the same as that which a subsequent age may require. Be
anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in,
and center your deliberations on its exigencies
and requirements.*

Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah CVI



Introduction

Transitions and translations

In the first and most astonishing of the transitions which mark its history, the cool and universal rationality of the Bahai Faith arose out of the messianic fervour of the Babi (*Bābī*) movement, in 19th-century Iran, like Venus on the foam. At a time of tyrannical, arbitrary and authoritarian governments, its founder, Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), and his son Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921) preached the virtues of constitutional government, the rule of law, democracy and the separation of organised religion from the institutions of the state. In a climate of cultural and religious obscurantism which, in reaction to the impact of the west, sought to turn Iran's back to the world, they combined a readiness to accept the best from any culture or civilization with a consciousness of their own heritage in the ancient and rich culture of Iran. At a time when the battles of the lately rediscovered clash of religious civilizations were already raging around them, they preached the peace of transcendence rather than of conquest.

Although they sought to keep some distance from the immediate political action, the political relevance of their message was not lost on their contemporaries. They were exiled from place to place, as prisoners of the Shah (*Shāh*) and then of the Ottoman Sultan, ultimately reaching the prison city of Akka (*ʿAkkā*) in Palestine. When Baha'u'llah died near the city in 1892 he was still technically a prisoner and an exile.

Abdu'l-Baha, who was just 9 years old when he first went into exile with his father, was not free to travel until the Young Turk rebellion of 1908 overthrew the Sultanate. When he was free, he travelled to Europe and North America. With these travels, the Bahai Faith made the second of its major transitions. In the East, where Iran had been going through a period of unrest culminating in its Constitutional Revolution, Abdu'l-Baha had written on the virtues of constitutional government and the need to moderate the power of the monarchy and the clergy. In the West, he spoke against cultural parochialism in France, met the suffragettes and free thinkers of the United Kingdom, opposed the nascent ideology of fascism in Europe, and in the United States spoke extensively on liberty, economic justice, the equality of men and women, and the abolition of racial prejudices. His gift to the Bahai community of his time was a set of clearly enunciated principles relevant to current social and political issues, for North America too was making a painful transition, into the industrialized age. The West was wrestling with the question of how much of the bright vision of the Enlightenment it could bring with it through that historical divide, and how it could be applied in the changed circumstances of a modern society. Abdu'l-Baha

could not be said to present a political programme, but the political understanding he offered was certainly current.

For the next several decades, the shape and destiny of the Bahai Faith lay largely in the hands of the English-speaking, particularly North American, believers. They had the freedom to travel, the means, the international vision and the organizational culture to build up some of the religious institutions that Baha'u'llah had envisioned, and to scatter outposts of the Bahai community around the globe. During this period the Bahai teachings were recast, with the emphasis on those elements which were of vital importance to the unity and health of the rapidly-growing community. The questions which will be particularly addressed in this book were then of lesser importance, and were neglected entirely or were treated in ways which, in the light of the questions facing human society in the new millennium, are now inadequate. For it is my contention that the Bahai Faith and the global society of which it is part are passing through another transition, and one which requires that the Bahai teachings should again be recast to focus on questions about the nature of liberty, of good governance and the civil society, of human rights and social responsibilities, of the place of religion in this society and in our lives. The functional differentiation of society, which is the dynamic underlying the pluralism, global scope and individualisation of society, is producing a society which is different in kind to anything the world has seen before. We cannot simply take an old model of 'what a society is,' whether taken from Greek philosophy, *The City of God*, or Durkheim's sociology, and insert the Bahai Faith into the now empty socket where religion 'belongs,' because that position no longer exists in a society in which religious ritual is the mirror of individual distinctiveness, not of collective identity, in which lasting pluralism means that no religion can attain the position of arbiter of common norms and values, and above all, in a society that has painfully learned, over the course of the 20th century, to see the wholesale transferal of norms from one sphere of life to another as the source of all evil. Economic affairs cannot be governed by political ideologies, science must be free of doctrine and political agendas, and politics should not be allowed to shelter under the umbrella of religion.

It seems undeniable to me that Bahai theology has to be reformulated in the present situation, if the Bahai Faith is to remain meaningful. However the aim of this book is not simply defensive. The purpose of producing a post-modern Bahai political theology is not to show that it can be done, to prove that the Bahai Faith or religion in general might outlive the secularisation thesis, but rather pastoral. A post-modern political theology should actually help people to function in the post-modern world. I believe that the Bahai writings, because they are not formulated in terms of the pre-

modern model of a stratified but theoretically monist society, offer a variety of religious repertoires that can help to make sense of the predicaments people face in a contemporary differentiated society. They allow us to reinterpret the differentiation of our experience into life-worlds, and the diversity that we experience in the cultural and religious spheres, not as signs of something wrong in the universe, but rather as *the way things are meant to be*. Differentiation and diversity in the human microcosm can be felt as a reflection of the differentiation and diversity of the cosmos, for unicity and singleness are to be found only in another realm which we can never enter, in the Godhead itself. All the worlds below – including the world of religion – are the realms of multiplicity, and therefore of ambiguity and doubt, and this is as it should be.

There is a large measure of continuity in the Bahai Faith, in as much as it is a Faith focussed on, and defined by, the persons and writings of Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha. But there is also a continual need for reformulation, refocusing, and translation into the terminology of a changing world. This book is intended to be another step in that process. While I argue against most previous formulations of the Bahai teachings on church and state, I do not deny the debt that we owe to earlier generations of Bahais.

About this book

This book has been limited to the relationship between church and state, because it is written within the framework of a Master's course in Islamic studies which allows only one year for writing the dissertation. It is intended to be the first volume in a larger work, including other aspects of Bahai political theology such as the institutions and principles of the religious community (the equivalent of ecclesiology), the relationship between the individual and the collective, and the nature of religious law in the Bahai system. The common thread for this political theology is the theme of organic unity, a metaphor so often misused that it must immediately be defended.

Society has been presented as something analogous to a body, and as an organic unity, since the Babylonian empire and perhaps earlier. This metaphor has supported the power of the powerful, the subordination of the weak, the extension of the ruler's power to every aspect of life, and the secondary importance of individuals. The body of society has been pictured as having one heart (or in modern times, one brain), with all the parts existing only to serve the will of the centre. The organs and limbs should therefore work in harmony, under direction. This is a fascist model of society, by which I intend not mere name-calling, but a literal reference to that

political philosophy that is embodied in the image of the *fasces* bound together, and the motto ‘strength in unity.’

I would like to reclaim the metaphor of society as a body for a new purpose, in the first place by inviting the reader to conduct a thought experiment: let your brain instruct your heart to cease operations for a moment. The least reflection shows that the fascist interpretation of the ‘body politic’ is based on pure fiction. Our bodies function without one organ commanding. The brain may not know of, let alone understand and control, the operations of other organs. Our bodies, the very model of organic unity, consist of distinct organs, each functioning autonomously according to its own internal logic, each affecting the others, and each needing the others to be fully itself. The liver, for instance, cannot do its alchemy of purification without the flow of blood from the heart; the heart cannot pump unless the blood is both purified and oxygenated. The harmony of the parts cannot be attributed to the command of any one organ: it derives from a transcendent and indefinable property, ‘being a being,’ a quality that cannot be located, but cannot be denied. Reinterpreted in this way, the metaphor of organic unity becomes a model of the postmodern society. It can also be applied to the institutions which make up the Bahai religious community, and to the metaphysical realities that Bahais refer to as the names and attributes of God, and it has obvious implications for the relationship between the individual and collective. This is too much to address in one volume. What can be presented here, the theology of church and state, is therefore no more than the first chapters of what would be a *postmodern Bahai political theology* on the theme of organic unity. These terms too require some explanation.

First, this is the first part of a *political theology*. Where political philosophy asks ‘What would utopia be like?’ and ‘how should social life be organised,’ a political *theology* asks ‘what should we believe about the Kingdom of God, about the ideal organisation of social life, the life of the faith community, and its relation to the world?’ A political theology does not simply describe or prescribe the institutions of social life (which would be political science), rather it asks, ‘what is the point’ of the institutions and rules of political and religious life, from the point of view of religion?

The difference between a political theology and a systematic theology is not just that a systematic theology is broader, including topics such as proofs of the existence of God, the nature of the prophets, reason and revelation and ethics, which will not be dealt with here, but also that in systematic theology ‘the world’ appears as one topic within the realm of religion, while political theology reverses this. In political theology, our religion is treated as part of our world-view, and ecclesiology as one aspect of the religious meaning of society.

This is also a *Bahai* theology, in the sense that I write primarily for the Bahais, and therefore use Bahai scriptural and historical sources. But a Bahai theology can hardly be exclusive, since Bahai scriptural resources include the Bible and the Quran (*Qur'ān*). Moreover, any political theology is in one sense at least universal, since it begins with the world. People of all faiths and none live within one world: pluralist and fragmented, but paradoxically the same world.

This is a *theology*, which is to say, not just a set of religious teachings, but a systematic discourse centred around God. A political theology examines the inferences of the political language used in religion. All language about how God acts in the world is analogous. We say for instance that God is the “Helper of the needy, the Deliverer of the captives, the Abaser of the oppressors, the Destroyer of the wrong-doers, the God of all men, the Lord of all created things.” The fact that such names are used in scripture entitles us to suppose that there is some sort of analogy between God’s acting as Lord and Deliverer and the human projects of lordship and liberation, and *vice versa*. There is nothing which would act, like a diode in an electrical circuit, to prevent the analogy working both ways, so the freeing of the slaves, for instance, is analogous to God the Deliverer leading his people out of bondage in Egypt. Therefore language about God is inescapably language about human beings, and political language used about God’s acting in the world inescapably speaks about human political relationships. What then does it mean to say that God is ‘the King,’ or that ‘sovereignty belongs to God’?

This is also a *postmodern* theology, which follows in fact from its being political, from the fact that it begins with the world and society. One cannot write political theology today as if society was still the same sort of thing as it was for Plato, al-Farabi (*al-Fārābī*) or Augustine. By postmodern here, I refer to the sociological fact, and not to current literary and philosophical theories about postmodernity. I regard these postmodernisms as various attempts to construct a theory that corresponds to the experience of living in society after the modern age, for a particular field such as literary criticism or philosophy. I will attempt to provide a Bahai theology which starts from the same social fact, and may either parallel or diverge from the postmodernisms proposed in other fields (but will in any case avoid the postcondemnerist style which has marred many postmodernisms). Thus the postmodern here refers to *the world we live in*, or that we feel we are coming to live in, and not to any particular school or author. My understanding of the dynamics and structure of a postmodern society is explained in more detail below.

Since I hold that our religious views are part of our world-view, and that the view of society contained in postmodernism is fundamentally different to the social

model of the ‘modern’ age (the age of the centralised and rationalised nation-state), it follows that while much of this Bahai theology should make sense to Islamic, Jewish, Christian or non-religious postmodern readers, it will be at best strange to Bahais who think not of ‘society’ but of ‘a’ society: an organisational unit having borders roughly congruent with those of a state (or more recently, of ‘Europe’ or ‘the West’) and a value system that is roughly congruent with a cultural tradition informed by one religion. As we will see in the review of church and state in the Bahai secondary literature, some Bahais have nursed a nostalgia for an even older model, in which society is an expansion of the family or a global confederation based on “tribal communities.”⁴ Some may still be expecting an end to “our dreadful western civilization” which divides life into separate compartments (to quote one of the more influential Bahai authors)⁵ and a return to the golden past. They are forewarned that they will find little common ground between such nostalgic hopes and the role of the Bahai Faith in a postmodern society as presented here.

The yawning gulf between the conservative and postmodern views is an indicator of the high ambition that motivates this first attempt at a postmodern Bahai theology, and an opportunity to give a preliminary answer to those who ask what a theologian, or a theology, could be good for, anyway. What is needed is not simply to recast Bahai thought in contemporary terms, or to hold the theological thinking of the Bahais up for critical examination in the light of Bahai scripture (both useful functions of theologians), but rather to drag Bahai thinking bodily from one world-view into the next. We can scarcely understand, now, the extent to which the Christians of the second and third centuries saw their religion in terms set by the shape of Roman society and the Roman state. If we do focus on that, we also see the magnitude of the transition initiated by Augustine’s theology, in disentangling the Christian religion from outdated suppositions about society. In the same way, the Bahai secondary literature, including statements issued by the official bodies of the Bahai community, show how deeply the thinking of the Bahai community is – unconsciously – committed to an old world-view. Assumptions about the nature of religion, the shape of society and of religious community, and the relation of the individual to these collectives are taken over from a pre-modern world-view, and are

⁴ Hatcher and Hatcher, *The Law of Love* 180.

⁵ David Hofman, *The Renewal of Civilization* (1946) chapter 8 (page 109 of the 1960 edition). The sentiment was expressed earlier by Genevieve Coy, in ‘A Century of Progress in Education’, *Star of the West* Vol. 24, No. 6 September 1933, pages 186-7.

assumed to be self-evident, or are explicitly labelled as ‘the Bahai teachings,’ although they have no possible anchor in the Bahai scriptures. We cannot hope to entirely extricate the Bahai faith from all such assumptions and see it ‘as it really is,’ for our religions are part of our world-views, and none of us can live without organising our thought and perceptions in terms of one or more world-views. We can however try to see the Bahai Faith within another world-view, as one part of the global polysystem of post-modern society, and I believe that we will see that it makes eminent sense when viewed in that way.

While the project is ambitious, no-one would imagine that such a wholesale transition can be achieved completely, and for everyone, by one author. There are no patent rights on the construction of the Bahai postmodern theology. I am also aware that the criticisms of those opposed to such a wholesale rethinking of Bahai teachings will themselves contribute to a healthy dialectic process which will take some generations. At the same time, the need for a Bahai theology closely related to the post-modern world is so pressing that we must put on seven-league boots, and attempt to cover as much of the distance as possible, now.

The dynamics of globalisation

Something must also be said about what I mean by ‘globalisation’ and ‘post-modern’ in the sociological sense. I understand globalisation as the whole process by which we move from the societies of the centralised nation-states of the ‘modern’ period to something which is structurally different. The two words are one semantic unit: ‘globalisation’ is the present process, and ‘post-modern’ is the result. Postmodern means ‘that which will have been globalized,’ as we imagine it.

Globalisation is not just a matter of extending existing social structures to a global level: the extension requires and reinforces deep changes in social structures, which in turn demand changes in our world-view: the result is a new kind of society as well as a globally extended society.

The key dynamic of globalisation is the progressive **differentiation** of different spheres of social life. Functional differentiation begins at the dawn of history, and is self-accelerating, in a process analogous to the curve of differentiation of the means of production. The division of labour increases productivity which yields surplus, and it also yields more specific expertise and thus more differentiated individual identities. The roles of the smith, the fisherman, the herdsman, the religious specialist and the ruler represent both distinct functions in society and opportunities for individuals to differentiate themselves from others. The greater expertise and surplus produced can be used for further progress, while competition between societies

ensures that there are penalties if differentiation does not progress. At first this differentiation could be partially accommodated by social stratification, for instance between the strata of rulers, warriors, scribes, artisans and peasants.

Although the process of differentiation goes back to prehistory, two significant steps can be noted. The first is the emergence of religions of transcendence in the axial age: in such religions the social order is not simply a part of the cosmic order, rather, the transcendent has a certain relation *to* social order, as something external and higher. Parts of the social order may relate more intimately with the cosmic order than others, so the transcendent creates the not-transcendent, and the possibility of having ‘worldly’ and ‘spiritual’ aspects of life. Kingship may still be divine, and supported by the religious order, but it is not self-evidently so. The divine king is a charioteer, harnessing two horses but not making them the same thing. They are institutionalised in two orders (priests and courtiers), and there is always the risk of them pulling in different directions. The voices of transcendence may demand one thing, and reasons of state something else. At a very early date, political philosophy emerges as distinct from theology, providing a non-religious justification for the existence of the state based on the necessity of punishment (and perhaps reward) to create social order and ensure prosperity.⁶

The second great step in the functional differentiation of society dates from about the 14th century, particularly in Europe, with a sharp acceleration in ‘modern’ times. Distinct institutions of politics, economics, religion and science already existed, but their degree of autonomy has increased and, for the first time, we see theoretical claims that they *ought* to be autonomous. The shift from a monist but stratified society to an organic and differentiated society gave the western societies in which it first occurred a tremendous competitive advantage, which is why globalisation is sometimes confused with westernization. In reality, a glance at western history shows that modernity was experienced there as something that ‘happened to’ western societies, and that it required deep and painful rethinking and great changes to Western social institutions. We see the establishment of the ‘free university,’ called so because it was intended to be free from religious control. Theories of national churches are advanced, intended to free the political sphere from religious control (and, if possible, to turn the tables). From the Hanseatic League

⁶ Arjomand gives an example in the Hindu political philosophy of Kautilya, dating from 300 BC (Arjomand, ‘Religion and the Diversity of Normative Orders,’ 44-5. For discussions of the differentiation of the religious and political in the axial age see Arjomand, *Political Dimensions*, chapter 1 (S.N. Eisenstadt) and chapter 2.

onwards, we see the realization that trade prospers best where the state interferes least. Within the sphere of politics, the theory of the separation of the judicial, legislative and executive powers is worked out. From the toleration of dissent, arguments for disestablishment are developed, and churches are constitutionally disestablished or withdraw from politics in the narrow sense (but in neither case from public life: one should not confuse institutional differentiation with the privatization of religion). These different institutions also became distinct life-worlds: not only is the church distinct from the state and the academy, but the way we reason and relate to one another is different when we are sharing a Christian mass, arguing politics and setting up a trading company. It is accepted that we behave according to different logics in different spheres.

The concept of different ‘logics’ that apply in different life-worlds can be compared to the idea of a core business in business studies. This does not entail that a business, or the institutions in a particular sphere, should concentrate exclusively on one task, but rather that they understand clearly what their nature and primary goals are, and the implications of this for the way they relate to others. It requires that they should align their internal life and structures in accordance with the requirements of their ‘core business.’ The idea of internal logics has also been admirably expressed in the subtitle of a work by S.T. Coleridge: *The Constitution of Church and State, according to the idea of each*, where the word ‘idea’ has its full platonic value. The institutions of politics and of organised religion are justified by their own missions, which each seeks to fulfil in the world.

The core business of government is coercion, and a state’s sovereignty consists of its monopoly on coercion. However, in any society beyond that of a slave plantation, coercion does not operate purely as an imposition. Coercion is a service provided by the business of government, as an integral part of its two prime functions, the provision of security and enabling effective collective action. I, of course, pay my taxes and obey the laws willingly, and would do so even if I were not coerced. However I would not do so willingly if my neighbours were not coerced. They might not pay their taxes, or their businesses might undercut mine by ignoring environmental laws. That is, some people might take a free ride on the backs of more conscientious citizens. My neighbours of course reason in the same way about me. Thus the coercion provided by government is necessary to enable the members of a society to freely support social action: coercion is the essential instrument of government to which Baha’u’llah refers:

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....⁷

No-one would suppose that the good society could be one based solely on coercion: the point illustrates the general rule that a clear understanding of the nature of one organ immediately highlights its relationship to other organs. If government's core business is coercion, it follows that government is not everything: it should aspire only to a limited role in relation to other human projects. "Penalties" may be "an effective instrument for the security and protection of men," but "dread of the penalties maketh people desist only outwardly from committing vile and contemptible deeds, while that which guardeth and restraineth man both outwardly and inwardly hath been and still is the fear of God."⁸ Baha'u'llah says that "The weakening of the pillars of religion hath strengthened the foolish and emboldened them and made them more arrogant ... The greater the decline of religion, the more grievous the waywardness of the ungodly. This cannot but lead in the end to chaos and confusion."⁹ The issue here has both individual and structural dimensions. First, religion can motivate individuals and teach norms and values (but so can non-religious forms of commitment). Second, the absence or ineffectiveness of institutional religion in society creates a vacuum which, in the time since Baha'u'llah wrote this, has tempted governments to seek to fill what is seen as a necessary social function. But government has no legitimate means of inspiring altruism, because altruism and coercion cannot share the same pillow. In the twentieth century the projects of nationalism, fascism and communism have sought to invest the state with an aura of ultimate authenticity which would inspire altruistic behaviour, and the result in every case has been not only a great deal of suffering but also the exposure of the ideology as a mask for power. More recently, the communitarian philosophy has provided a justification for state support for a hegemony of one culture as a means

⁷ Cited as translated by Shoghi Effendi in *Gleanings* CII. More literally: 'The reins of protection, security and assurance in outward matters are in the mighty grasp of the government. This is the wish of God and His decree....' Wherever no Persian or Arabic source is given in connection with a quotation translated by Shoghi Effendi, I have used the text in the Bahai World Centre's CTA translation aid.

⁸ Baha'u'llah, Lawh-e Dunya, in *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* 93, *Majmu'ih az Alwah* 53.

⁹ Kalimat-e Firdawsiyyih (Words of Paradise), in *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* 63-64, *Majmu'ih az Alwah* 34-5.

of fostering the common norms and values that communitarians believe to be necessary. If (God forbid) it were to be as successful as previous forms of collectivism, its results would no doubt be as horrifying.

However high-minded their rhetoric, governments cannot surrender their core business of coercion, which means that government cannot itself be the source of altruism (though government service is a sphere for altruistic action). This in turn means that good government must allow the free operation of other human projects, such as religion and culture, which can supply what government lacks. Religion on the other hand can elicit altruism, but it undermines its own credibility when the religious institutions take control of the instruments of coercion, as in contemporary Iranian theocracy. The Law of religion can only operate on the basis of the fear of God, its disciplines voluntarily accepted by people who may freely leave and so exempt themselves from religious law. This would not be a very plausible way of running a state.

The difference between the logics of religion and of government means that they deal with individual members differently, as believers and as citizens respectively. Beliefs are not relevant to citizenship status, and civil status should be irrelevant to membership of the religious community. Citizenship and its duties cannot be adopted and renounced at will, while membership of the religious community can be. The differentiation of the two spheres therefore arises from the fundamental nature of each. Particular thinkers and traditions, and historical accident, have enabled this distinction to be embodied earlier or more clearly in some societies, and most clearly in the last two centuries in western societies, but the principle itself is not Western or Christian but logical and essential. Abdu'l-Baha considered the clear awareness of the autonomy of the religious sphere to be one of the causes of Europe's greater progress:

when [Europeans] removed these differences, persecution, and bigotries out of their midst, and proclaimed the equal rights of all subjects and the liberty of men's consciences, the lights of glory and power arose and shone from the horizons of that kingdom ... These are effectual and sufficient proofs that the conscience of man is sacred and to be respected; and that liberty thereof produces widening of ideas, amendment of morals, improvement of conduct, disclosure of the secrets of creation, and manifestation of the hidden verities of the contingent world. ... Convictions and ideas are within the scope of the comprehension of the King of kings, not of kings; ... 'The ways unto God are as the number of the breaths of [His] creatures' is a mysterious

truth, and ‘To every [people] We have appointed a [separate] rite’ is one of the subtleties of the Quran.¹⁰

Equally, those countries in which the autonomy of the economic sphere has been recognised have prospered, while those that subordinate economic activities to national interest or political ideology trail behind. Likewise, the liberation of the scientific and educational sphere from any religious *a priori* has accelerated scientific and technological progress. We can generalise these processes by saying that the functional differentiation of society is the motor behind the creation of successful contemporary societies, and that this differentiation entails not just the separation of institutions, but also the differentiation of the individual’s roles as citizen, fellow-believer, scientist and economic agent.

Although the transcendent concept of the cosmos contained in the religions of revelation underlies the differentiation of the religious from the worldly, the religions of revelation have not in general wholeheartedly endorsed the “de facto pluralism of normative orders”¹¹ which they spawned. The sense that this pluralism is *wrong* seems to have been deep-seated. In the 20th century, communism and fascism have sought to re-establish a monist normative order, with the result, as George Orwell foresaw, that truth was no longer something distinct from political expedience. The distance created by dual normative orders is also the space required for ethical critique. The task for a contemporary political theology is to elevate this normative pluralism into an explicit religious principle, by justifying not only the existence of the order of politics, but the existence of plural orders *per se*.

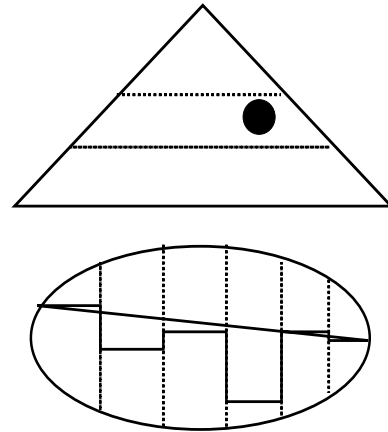
The differentiation of the political as just one aspect of life entails another sort of differentiation, between the state and society, with the result that elements of the religious order can choose to relate primarily to the state *or* to the people. The question of ‘church and state’ is in fact a *ménage à trois*, in which religion may serve to domesticate the people on behalf of the political order, or mobilise them against it, and in which the state may coerce the people on behalf of the religious order, restrict their appeal to it, or protect them from religious coercion. The religious order and the political may compete for popular legitimation, and the actual shape of church-state relations is determined not only by the institutionalisation of each order and the constitutional rules applying between them, but also by the social dynamics

¹⁰ *A Traveller’s Narrative* 89-92. The Persian is in the Philo Press edition 204-5. The citation is Quran 22:35.

¹¹ Arjomand, ‘Diversity of Normative Orders’ 52.

that distribute legitimation to one or both.

The multiple roles of the individual as citizen, fellow-believer, scientist and economic agent in the different life-worlds brings us to the second dynamic of globalisation: **individualisation**. When society shifted from a unitary but stratified structure to a functionally differentiated structure, the principle of individual identity changed absolutely. We can picture this with two diagrams. The first is a triangle representing an individual in a unitary stratified society, where the strata represent primarily status and power, and only secondarily specific social functions. The second shows the profile of one individual in a functionally differentiated society, in which the vertical areas represent economic life, religious life and political life. In the first diagram, the individual has one identity: he might be a ‘gentleman’ in commerce, religion and politics. But in a differentiated society the person is smeared across the life-worlds: we have profiles rather than individual identities. Each person comes to act in distinct ways in the different spheres, and maintains a distinct status in each sphere. The poor cobbler may be a respected leader in the Methodist circle, the magistrate may be excluded from communion: we are different ‘selves’ in different contexts. That also means that individuals have more freedom in constructing their own identities, and are dealt with in each sphere as individuals and not as members of a family, group or class.



Coupled with this **individualisation** comes the possibility and concept of individual freedoms, and the claims of classes, ethnic minorities and women to share in them as individuals. I regard feminism as an aspect of individualisation, because individualisation entails that society recognises that its basic unit is the individual, and not the family, class, production unit or religious or ethnic community. The effects are so remarkable that feminisation could be considered among the most important dynamics of globalization, but the various issues concerning the status of women according to the Bahai teachings are postponed here, to be dealt with in later volumes.

Individualism as a political philosophy, which is to say, the recognition that the individual is the basis and justification for collective life and not *vice versa*, is certainly the most important value of postmodern societies and, coupled with structural differentiation, the key to their astonishing success. Individualism is the

prerequisite of a society governed by law, of democracy as a technique of government, and of the concept of human rights, and also provides a climate for innovation in science and effort in commerce. The high valuation of the individual and the recognition of rights to sufficiency and self-development also underlie the welfare state and modern mass education.

In a functionally differentiated, religiously pluralistic and individualised society, religions cannot play the public role of providing social cohesion for society as a whole, and they must seek new roles. One strategy is to develop individual religious identity as a counterpoint to social identity, so that being Muslim, Methodist, or Mormon becomes an element in identity that differentiates one individual from another and assures each of their individuality. This entails the individualisation of religion, creating a private sphere within which religious values and world-view provide a sense that the old society – the pre-differentiated society and the singular identity it offered to the individual – still exists, although it plainly does not exist outside the home and the religious community. The second strategy, pursued here, is for a religion to re-invent itself in terms of globalisation, to offer itself as a means of giving meaning to post-modern society.

Rotating the axes of society and smearing individual identity across multiple worlds causes a good deal of stress – the experience is analogous to what happens in *Star Trek* when something goes wrong with “Beam me up, Scotty,” and the individual ceases to be located in any particular place. How much stress is involved depends in part on how rapidly world-views change to accommodate the new situation. Any substantial lag is experienced as moral chaos or a ‘wrongness’ in the world, and in the self. The intra-personal tension may be externalised by identifying ‘enemies’ who are responsible for the chaos, or the individual may retreat into fantasies such as survivalism, or may seek a leader who promises a high power difference, thus providing a definitely located identity for the individual. All of these responses to individual stress have potential social and political effects that should concern us. The Bahai Faith tells its followers that a radically different way of ordering the world (a new ‘World Order’) is not to be feared, and the Bahai teachings anticipate the key dynamics of globalisation. These teachings could well alleviate some of the tension by supporting a world-view in which the differentiated and individualised society is not a threat but rather the way things are meant to be.

Another effect of functional differentiation has been that geographic boundaries belonging to one sphere are not transferred to another. Trade is not confined by the boundaries of the state or the religious community, and religious communities cross political boundaries. **Global integration** is the process in which

commerce, having become an autonomous sphere functioning according to its own logic, then discovers that neither national nor religious boundaries are relevant to it, and so becomes a world economic system. Where trade leads, technologies of transport and communication follow, and this makes it possible for science, politics and religion to be integrated globally.

The development of global subsystems is not inevitable, or at least not predictable, since the dynamics of global integration appear to differ in the different spheres. Politics is driven to global integration, by common problems, by the globalization of the economy, the freeloader problem, tax competition and so on. States find they need a rule of law and institutions of implementation, and they are deliberately constructing them. Science however is a naturally global system, where barriers of external control, language and communication do not intervene. Economic, political and scientific global systems are thus forming, but in different ways. None of this necessarily applies to religion or to religions, especially if we think of religions acting primarily at the local level through face to face interactions such as religious rituals. Perhaps religion will not become the next global sub-system, but rather one of the local and particular components of a global society. In sociology, this is the question of ‘religion as a global system,’ which is intriguing but seems to have no clear answer yet. In the context of a Bahai systematic theology, it is the question of the relationship between religion as such, “The changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future,”¹² and particular historical revelations of which Baha’u’llah’s is one. Can one religion become a global religious system in itself, or can religions in the plural form such a system? But this would take us from political theology to prophetology, and we must leave the question for now.

The last dynamic of globalization I would like to mention is **pluralism and relativism**, due to intensified intercultural and interreligious contacts and migration, which in turn are due to the global integration of the political and economic systems. When we speak of postmodernism in philosophy and the fine arts, we are referring mainly to this aspect of globalisation. The implications of relativism in philosophy and theology have been far-reaching, and it is tempting to explore them further, since Shoghi Effendi has said that the “fundamental verity underlying the Bahai Faith [is] that religious truth is not absolute but relative,”¹³ but we are concerned here primarily with the effects of cultural and religious pluralism in societies.

¹² Baha’u’llah, *Kitab-e Aqdas*, paragraph 182.

¹³ *Baha’i Administration* 185; see also *World Order of Baha’u’llah* 58, 115.

As intercultural and interreligious contacts and migration relativize truth claims and social norms, it becomes harder to find ideological support for social structures. The family, we now know, is not a given: it is made by people, in many different ways. The class system is not part of the divine order. Ideologies have proven untenable, and ideology itself has been asked to turn around for inspection – and we can see at the very least that the emperor’s new clothes have a large hole in the rear. Ideologies too are seen to be manufactured, their doctrines designed to support interests. Political theories that supposed that shared ideologies and values are the basis of social unity have given way to a model of society that is united, despite differences, by our needs for one another. States that still possess a state ideology, such as Iran and Turkey, are now anachronisms.

For completeness’ sake, I should also mention the dynamic of **technological progress** and the convergence of material cultures. This is a major contributor to globalisation, although I do not intend to deal with it further.

The limits of theology

In this view, society is a polysystem, that is, a system containing areas or entire subsystems in which the laws governing the behaviour of other parts of the system do not apply, or different laws do apply. Arithmetic, for instance, is a system but mathematics is a polysystem. All the functions of arithmetic can in principle be reduced to possible manipulations of discrete like objects such as coins, counting stones or abacus beads. But there are fields of mathematics that bear no possible relationship to physical objects – the use of square roots of negative numbers for instance. There are other fields with laws that are additional to arithmetic laws, such as set theory. Sets are not like objects, and one set may intersect or subsume another. I call society a polysystem in part because it is highly complex and can be broken down for analytic purposes into functionally differentiated subsystems, but especially to draw attention to the fact that the ‘logics’ of the various parts differ. The idea of different logics implies that no explanation of the whole system – whether that be a theological explanation of society (a political theology) or a sociological or economic model – can claim to provide an overall theoretical framework that is also valid in models of society derived from other disciplines.

The economy, to take one example, functions in accordance with the rational maximization of utility, and its behaviour can be predicted from this behavioural ‘law’ and others. Nobody would imagine that behaviour in the arts or religion could be usefully explained or predicted by the same law. Yet economics, art, government

and religion are not hermetically sealed spheres. An economic model of society should include submodels for the arts, education, religion, science and government, because these aspects of society have economic effects and are affected by economic life. The economic model of society may translate the behaviour of these other ‘projects’ using para-economic concepts such as social capital, social goods, symbol production and symbolic consumption, psychological utility and so forth. Although such an economic model might incorporate economic descriptions of the whole of society, it would still be an *economic* model, and not a comprehensive social model (whatever its practitioners might imagine!). It would be a model of the whole in terms defined by one subsystem, the project of economic life. No-one should imagine that such a model describes the inherent dynamics of artistic appreciation or creation, the attraction and awe that the holy exercises on the mystic, the solidarity of the family or the curiosity of science – at least, not in ways that correspond to the experience and motivations of the participants. Similarly, science has models of religion, within disciplines such as the ‘history of religions,’ the psychology of religion, and the sociology of religion, but these are not religion as religion understands itself.

Religion too has something to say about science and technology: that all knowledge is a path to God since truth is one, that humans are in this world as stewards of creation, and that human knowing is a manifestation of the name of God ‘The All-Knowing.’ Clearly these are not the concerns that drive the scientist *as a scientist*: it would be difficult to derive the norms of falsifiability and replicability from them. A scientist as a believer might understand what a theology says about the project of science, but would be perfectly capable of doing science without any knowledge of religion, and will do science best if he, or she, does it according to the logic of science without regard for theology.

The same limitation applies to religious models of society, or ‘political theologies.’ Religion is just one of the human projects that make up society, so political theology cannot assume that religion should provide normative explanations for all of the projects in society. A political theology should describe the other projects in religious terms, but this does not imply that religion exercises a hegemony of value over other projects. A political theology can at most say what other projects can mean *for religion*, it cannot claim to describe how they ought to appear in their own lights. The theorists of Islamic integrism¹⁴ have often said that Islam embraces

¹⁴ See Jansen, *Dual Nature*, chapter 2, and the sources cited there. The term *integrist* is preferred to ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘Islamist’ throughout, because it seems more precisely to pinpoint the approach to religion *and to society* which is common to those who have

the whole of society (and there is the danger that the same could be said of the Bahai Faith, in that virtually every aspect of life is at least mentioned somewhere in the Bahai scriptures). In practice, however, the factor 'Islam' does not adequately explain all that is going on in an Islamic society. Nor should it, according to the organic social model employed here. Religion is not everything, although it may speak *of* everything. The integrists' claim that religion has a hegemony is untrue in practice, and wrong in principle.

If we have economic, religious and political models of society, each seeing the whole in its own terms, the question arises, are there no universal categories, no possibility of a model of society as a whole? I can only venture an answer, acknowledging that it comes primarily from the project of religion and the point of view of a believer. I suggest that the only model adequate to the polysystem of society as a whole is the category of the person, by which I mean both the human person and the person of God. But this does not help us much, since the person is a mystery – a holy mystery. How is it that we each do science according to the rules of science, believe as believers, are citizens of the state and explore the arts and – by and large – pass from one life-world to the other without dropping a stitch? We know that an excess of faith in art makes for bad art, that the ethics of the state are not the same as those of an individual, that the truths of revelation and of science are drinks better taken unmixed. How do we know this, and how do we maintain this equilibrium?

been called Christian, Islamic and Bahai fundamentalists, and because the term Islamist is specific to Islam and concedes too much: Islamic traditionalists and modernists are not less Islamic than those who call themselves Islamists. The term integrist is borrowed from the French, where it referred originally to those who held fast to Catholic tradition, rejecting all changes: this is what we would now call a traditionalist stance, seeking to maintain the *integrity* of the tradition. As a result of the word's use in connection with Islamists, it has come to refer to those whose stance is conservative in relation to changes in their own religion, and who seek to *integrate* all aspects of society under the banner of their own religion, or more modestly to create for themselves an integral religious and social community as separate as possible from the society around them. Integrists of all religions construct their own identities by opposition to theological modernism, secularisation, individualisation, the relativising effects of globalisation, and the structural differentiation of society. The premise in every case is that society should be an integrated whole, in which religion provides coherence (see e.g., Riesebrodt, *Pious Passion*, 65, 182). All fundamentalists are integrists, but I do not think that Bahai integrists can usefully be called fundamentalists, since two characteristics of fundamentalism, xenophobia and religious nativism, are absent (see, e.g., *op. cit.* 61).

Every logical system contains axioms that cannot be proved within that system. In this system, which is my political theology for the Bahai Faith, this must simply be stated as an axiom – that the person, human and divine, is a mystery; that the person harmonises incommensurate qualities and is the highest possible category. This means that the individual – any individual – is prior to any collective. Society as a polysystem, with its diverse organs functioning according to different laws, can at its harmonious best be somewhat like a single person, but the individual already is that. Society also derives its value from the individual, and not vice versa. This theology, as a postmodern theology, is axiomatically individualistic.

Of church and state

One motive for writing this book now rather than in some indefinite future when my knowledge may be more adequate, is that the issue of church and state has moved to the top of the agenda. This is a burning question in several respects: *universally* in human societies, and in contemporary world politics as an emblem of wider disagreements concerning the application of enlightenment values in a post-enlightenment world; in Bahai *apologetics* because of the publication of works about the Bahai Faith, some critical and some meant to be objective, which claim that the Bahai Faith has as its goal the institution of a global theocratic state; and finally because the increasing *social engagement* of Bahai communities means that we now need to understand this issue ourselves, because it affects not only what will happen in the far future but also what we are becoming now, but the way it is treated in the secondary Bahai literature is particularly inadequate.

To begin with the first of these: the relationship between the religious and political institutions of society is one of the oldest questions in human society, going back perhaps to prehistoric rivalries between medicine men or women and tribal chiefs. The issue 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 issue is not simply constitutional and political, but also cultural, because religions have been central to the symbolisation of social order in most cultures, but in most contemporary cultures that is no longer tenable. In recent years 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 religious community and its laws. The assertion that the separation of church and state has no justification in Islam might be likened to a flag planted by Islamic integrist to mark out the field on which the clash of civilizations will be fought – and also as an assertion by Orientalists that the object of their study is utterly foreign. Few other

doctrines can awaken such unanimous rejection among the heirs of the western liberal tradition, in east and west. In the west there is a common horror of rule by clerics, a horror in which more or less uninformed western images of Islam, and particularly of Iran, are mixed with images drawn from our own western history, from Protestant portrayals of the Inquisition, through the anti-clerical tradition of the French revolution, to the anti-religious rhetoric of the ‘battle between science and religion’ of the early 20th century.¹⁵ Rule by religion has had a singularly bad press. The Islamic revival has given the West the opportunity to focus this abhorrence on an external other: Islam stands identified with clerical rule (if we conveniently forget that the great majority of Islamic countries, throughout history, have been monarchies rather than theocracies, and that some are now, more or less, democracies), and on this issue at least we in the West know where we stand and why. Moreover, the extremes of the Islamic Brotherhood in Egypt, the Iranian revolution and al-Qaida have provided the West with new negative images which can conveniently be applied to Islam as a whole. It would be difficult indeed to rouse any enthusiasm in the secularized and desacralised west for a religious defence of the West European version of the Christian faith and heritage against the rising tide of Islam. But no effort is required to achieve a consensus that any force seeking to turn back the clock, in the direction of theocracy, must be resisted.

The separation of church and state thus becomes a slogan, 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 the world. Having separated church and state, how do societies live with religion and politics, and how do individuals combine their religious practice with social, and therefore political, participation? The solution which I have found in the Bahai writings may be of interest to societies and individuals, of whatever faith. For I think it shows that adherence to fundamental values which are derived from religion and faith does not necessarily entail a denial, or even relativization, of the just rights and prerogatives of the state, or of the dignity of statecraft. It is indeed possible to be a citizen of the

¹⁵ Theocratic beliefs are still alive in the West, in the contemporary Christian reconstructionist and dominion theology movements (which appear to be two different names for the same thing), but without any church order adequate to fulfill grand political ambitions that are both worldly and global in scope. As such, these radical but friable movements appear less threatening than the images presented by Islamic integrists or the Roman Catholic past.

city of God and of an earthly country, providing one can establish that God so wills it.

The issue of church and state is not only a marker for the front line in the battle of civilizations, but also the occasion of domestic unease of various kinds in the West. The Protestant countries of the West are watching the growth of a politically active and influential expression of Christian integrism with argus eyes, unable to dispense with religion, whose power to motivate altruism has been recognized, but equally unwilling to allow that the integrists' claims to possess the revealed truth can have any place in the political process. An article in *Time* magazine cites one of the 'Promise Keeper' pledges, which includes the verse "... go, and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."¹⁶ *Time* comments, "On the small scale of Lawton's First Assembly of God church, the inspiration is palpable, touching, poignant. But in the grander scheme, the Bible verse raises other questions: Who on earth will command? And who must obey?"¹⁷ Recent elections in the United States have shown the continuing political power of organized religion – although it is 'organized' in the case of these Protestant movements outside of the established and orthodox churches, and by self-appointed evangelists rather than by the clergy.

Similarly, the post-communist Roman Catholic countries of Eastern Europe are feeling the renewal of direct political influence from the clergy, and are suffering a degree of dissonance in the process. Clearly most of the churches, particularly the Catholic church in Poland, have contributed a great deal to keeping more humane values alive through the decades of official materialism, under a ruling culture dependent on omnipresent informants and large-scale official lies. A considerable debt of thanks and respect is due to them. In many cases the same churches served as rallying-points in the anti-communist revolutions that enabled these countries to move out of the isolation and stagnation in which they had sunk. However it is equally clear that the forward movement that they have aided cannot continue without an acceptance of the separation of church and state, as a universally recognized prerequisite for the foundation of a modern state. The churches that have stood as parents in the birth of the post-communist states must now let their offspring go out into the world on their own – accepting the irony that the exclusion of the church

¹⁶ Matthew 18:19-20.

¹⁷ *Time*, Vol. 150 No. 15, Atlantic edition, October 13 1997, 40.

from direct participation in political life was one of the doctrines of the communist movement which they have helped to overthrow.

In England, church establishment appears more untenable every year, as religious pluralism, unchurched religion, and irreligion steadily reduce the proportion of the population who support Anglican institutions. In Italy, Spain and Ireland, where the Roman Catholic church is established, the question of what this means in terms of legislation on abortion and divorce has been given in referenda into the hands of the citizen-believers. In these countries, where the faithful and the citizenry are almost co-extensive, the debates have shown that this is not primarily a struggle between parties with differing visions of the nation and its future, but rather a struggle within individuals for an understanding wide enough to embrace these two aspects of the human person.

My second reason why church and state is an urgent issue referred to the attacks the Bahai Faith has suffered on this point in recent years. Some of these will be referred to in the survey of secondary literature, and *en passant* where relevant points are touched on in the text. The polemic focus on this point is understandable. The characteristic theological doctrine of the Bahai Faith is ‘progressive revelation,’¹⁸ and its characteristic social teaching is the unity of the human race, a unity which should find expression in a reign of universal peace upheld by a world government. The Bahai Writings mandate a world super-state, with an elected world legislature, a world executive and judiciary. The same scriptures mandate, and give quite detailed prescriptions for, the Bahai administrative order, containing elected, appointed and hereditary elements, which culminates in the twin institutions of the Guardianship and the Universal House of Justice who are empowered respectively to interpret the Bahai Writings and to legislate for matters not contained in those Writings. This administrative system is presented as a pattern and model for the organization of the world. Since the Bahai Faith has no clergy, its well-organized administrative machinery, consisting of elected ‘Assemblies’ at local and national levels and the ‘Universal House of Justice’ at the international level, has been critically important in coordinating its activities and maintaining its unity. A large part of Bahai energies

¹⁸ In fact this doctrine is shared by both Islamic and Christian theologies, both of which recognize a chain of historical revelations leading up to the revelation which is definitive for the religion. The difference is that the Babi and Bahai version of this doctrine is open-ended, since revelation never ceases, and in principle revelations outside of the Semitic heritage are recognized.

over the last several generations, in those countries where they are free to do so, has been devoted to building up these administrative institutions.

The question which naturally arises is what the relationship may be between the elected administrative machinery which the Bahais have devoted so much of their collective energies to erecting and the institutions of the world government which they proclaim as necessary and inevitable. The suspicion that they might be one and the same thing is natural, and not all the writers who have taken this view have done so perversely, to attack the Bahai programme. But some have used the issue deliberately to present the Bahais in a way calculated to arouse fear or contempt in modern audiences.

The most sustained and perverse of these is Ficicchia's *Der Baha'ismus – Religion der Zukunft?*¹⁹ (1981), according to which the Bahai Faith is not only totalitarian intolerant and anti-pluralist²⁰ in its internal structure, it seeks to make that structure the government of a *theokratischen Weltherrschaft*,²¹ a theocratic world dominion, which would be centralized²² rather than federal, and would include a centrally-planned economy. Indications to the contrary are dismissed as opportunistic tactics and *taqiyya* (*taqīyya*, the dissimulation of beliefs),²³ that is, as a mask that will be abandoned when the true goal of world dominion becomes attainable. It is a monstrous vision that Ficicchia conjures up, and it has had an effect on the public perception of the Faith in German-speaking countries. In 1988 the Bahai community was refused permission to place an information stand in a public place in Berlin on the grounds that the Bahai material "contains things that are contrary to the free democratic constitution of Germany."²⁴

In Ficicchia's case I cannot believe that such criticisms are anything but deliberate distortions, but in other cases there are genuine concerns arising, on the

¹⁹ For a Bahai response see Schaefer, Towfigh, and Gollmer, *Desinformation als Methode, die Baha'ismus-Monographie des F. Ficicchia*, 1995.

²⁰ Pages 400, 398, 393.

²¹ Page 271.

²² Pages 389-390, 393, 400.

²³ Page 399.

²⁴ The letter, from the *Bezirksamts* of Berlin-Steglitz, dd. 5.1.1988, is reprinted in Schaefer, Towfigh and Gollmer, *Desinformation als Methode*, page 6 note 23.

one hand, from the very confused articulation in the Bahai secondary literature on this point, and on the other hand as a byproduct of anxieties about other threats to post-enlightenment society from other directions: Islamic and Christian integrism on the one hand, and the historic reluctance of Catholic and Orthodox churches to embrace a modernity which, to be fair, was less than willing to embrace them in return. A western intellectual culture that is drawing itself up to defend the achievements of the Enlightenment cannot afford to admit within its ranks anyone whose commitment to enlightenment values is questionable. I hope not only to show that the Bahai teachings are in accordance with enlightenment values, in the sense that these values can be regarded as a previous manifestation of the same transformation which was later to be embodied in the Bahai teachings, but also to show a way in which the fortress may be unnecessary. For if I have understood them correctly, the Bahai teachings not only provide a theological justification for the separate existence of the state but also some indications of how church and state, once securely separated, are to be reconciled.

Thus Church and state is a critical issue for human societies in general, for the antagonists in the clash between eastern and western cultures (or religious and modernist visions of society) at the present juncture, and for the Bahai Faith now that it is receiving more attention as a community and model of governance warranting serious consideration. It is self-evident that it is worthwhile for Bahais and Bahai scholars to try to articulate the Bahai teachings on education, the abolition of racism, the equality of men and women, the harmony of religions and fellowship between religions, and so on. If the issue of church and state is as fundamental to human societies and present anxieties as I have said, and if the Bahai teachings on this question have the potential for healing these anxieties which I think I have uncovered, then it should be equally self-evident that the Bahais need now to focus on this topic in study and public information programmes. This is not an issue to be postponed to the far future.

The third reason why church and state is an important question for the Bahai Faith at this time is that our attitudes to the state will shape our own development as a religious community. What is at stake is our stance towards our social environment. The attitude we find in the Bahai Writings to the physical environment – to the good things of the world and the enjoyment of the senses – is very positive. This will, in the long term, shape the Bahai community into forms very different to those taken by religious communities that have a deep distrust of material creation and physical enjoyments. Our relation to our social environment, of which the state is an important part, can be expected to have analogous effects. If we begin with the idea that the

state and the whole project of human governance is illegitimate, as in the more extreme forms of Islamic integristism, or at best a necessary evil, as in much of Christian political theology, then one would expect the Bahai community to develop a conception of itself as apart from and in some sense more pure than the world around it. On the other hand, the belief that statecraft and government are projects that have been endorsed and commanded by God (as have science and the arts) would appear to be a positive foundation for a working relationship between Bahai communities and the structures of governance in the broadest sense. Whatever attitude we take to the world and its governments, we are inevitably required by our involvement in the world and concern for the well-being of its peoples to work with governments and politicians where possible. There are now a number of countries in which the Bahai community represents a small but significant portion of the population, and the question of what the Bahais intend eventually to create in those countries and in the world will be asked. And in other countries, where the Bahai communities are a very small minority, our understanding of this issue will have an immediate effect as we seek to “attract people of capacity,” and as the community is “drawn more deeply into dealing with world issues.”²⁵ If we harbour the idea that statecraft is illegitimate, politics dirty, and that the whole structure would, in an ideal world, be swept away, then our relationships to the politicians and institutions we deal with can hardly be whole-hearted and sincere. Political actors in turn can hardly be expected to sincerely respect the Bahai institutions and what they stand for. A negative assessment of the value of the state and statecraft in the divine scheme of things would make a charade of our efforts to contribute to the United Nations and other organs of global governance by presenting Baha’u’llah’s teachings on world federalism. Why would we be devoting such efforts, for instance to UN charter revisions, if the perfection of that body with its recognition of the Order of Baha’u’llah would mean that it recognize its own illegitimacy? Shall we baptise the state, or the global state, only to abolish it? Since we are engaged in efforts to aid the progressive perfection of human government at all levels, we have an immediate need for solid foundations for a sincere and wholehearted relationship to government *per se*.

Baha’u’llah’s solution to this ancient and topical question lies between the two poles of theocracy on the one hand and a wall of separation between church and state on the other, but it cannot be adequately described as a compromise within this polarity because two new elements have been injected in the equation: Baha’u’llah

²⁵ Universal House of Justice, Ridvan message, BE 150.

provides a theological justification and divine charter for the institution of the state and a new interpretation of the metaphor of ‘organic unity’ as a model of society. But Baha’u’llah’s solution is certainly not difficult to understand: it might be characterized as the harmony of permanently differentiated organs of equal dignity, within an organic body politic which is understood in terms of the interdependence of the parts rather than their subordination to a single rationale.

This solution could also bridge a gap that exists in the theological systems of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, between systematic theologies and theologies of the state. The religious communities of the Western traditions all have models of ideal ‘social’ structures, on various levels. They have, for example, ultimate eschatological models of the Kingdom of God and the reign of justice. This is an ideal society to be created by divine intervention at the end of time. There are also metaphysical models in which entities such as angels, prophets, the Hidden Imam and the souls of the departed relate to the world and to one another. This is the realm of saints and angels, but also of unverifiable dynamics such as ‘love conquers all’ and reward and retribution. These models show a spiritual reality under and beyond material reality, and present pictures of the life after death. Then there are ‘ecclesiological’ models, that is, models of the religious community’s own ideal existence as a commonwealth, whether it is expressed in terms of the church as the body of Christ, the community of the Islamic faithful reflecting the primitive community of Medina, or the house of Israel as a people chosen in service to God. Clearly there are connections between the models of the ideal Kingdom at the end of time, the life with God in the next world, the spiritual realities and dynamics which are already active, and the community of the faithful. One could speak of a single model projected into three dimensions: the millennial future, the metaphysical, and the community itself.

These religious communities also have immediate goals and activities, in societies that are governed by state institutions. They therefore have at least implicit theologies of the state. These serve as models by which they picture what ‘the state’ should be doing, how it comes to exist at all, and what they as religious communities are doing as they are relating to the state. While there is broad congruence between pictures of the Kingdom of God throughout the Western religious traditions, there is a radical divergence in the theologies of the state. The difference exists not primarily between Jewish, Christian and Islamic theologies, but within each tradition. Even among groups that are theologically closely related, one finds some world-rejecting groups that are hostile to the state as irretrievably worldly, while others try to seize the state from secular control and return it to the hands of faith. Some churches have moved from one stance to another within a matter of generations. These differences

in theologies of the state are possible because the state is absent from the relatively stable theological models of the Kingdom of God and (excluding some short-lived theocratic states) is by definition external to the religious community's ecclesiological model. The state may be seen as evil, as an evil wisely ordained for a wicked time, or as the secular arm performing the will of the church by other means; it may be baptised, reformed or overturned, but it cannot be truly good, because in the eschatological, metaphysical and ecclesiological models of the truly good society, there is no state. The Kingdom to come is pictured as a non-political society. Christian, Islamic and Jewish theologies of the state are at best loosely related to these communities' systematic theologies and are therefore highly variable. And because states also know that there is no room for a state in the Kingdom, the relationships between churches and states cannot be more than tactical. Where true acceptance is withheld on one side, trust cannot be given on the other.

For these reasons, and given the importance that church-state theories have assumed in Islamic integrists' rhetoric vis-a-vis the West, the model of church-state relationships in the Bahai scriptures is exceptionally interesting. Coming from the Islamic world itself, the Bahai Faith presents a justification of the separation of church and state going far beyond those produced in the West. Millennialist in origin²⁶ and still occupying a peripheral position in most countries, its scriptures nevertheless present stronger arguments for the rights of the state than can be found even in the theologies of established churches. From the position that the Messiah has come and the eschaton has been initiated in the life of Baha'u'llah, the Bahai Faith presents an eschatological model in which the state is not rendered redundant by the coming of the Messiah, but rather has been blessed and guided by that Coming.

In this version of the Kingdom of God there is a state within the Kingdom of God, and principles governing its relationship with the religious order. Social institutions manifest metaphysical realities, and the principles governing church-state relationships are believed to reflect "the necessary relations inherent in the realities of things,"²⁷ which in turn reflect the nature of God. The platonic reality that the state exists to manifest is part of the Kingdom in Heaven. Moreover the relationship of

²⁶ For a sociological study of the transition from millenarianism, see Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions*.

²⁷ Abdu'l-Baha, *Tablet to August Forel* 13, 20, 24; *Tablet to the Hague* 3; *Selections* 198; *Tablets* vol. 3 page 525; *Tablet to Laura Barney* in Gail, *Summon up Remembrance* pages 174-176; *Sermon on the Art of Governance* see page 395 below.

organic unity between differentiated institutions of church and state corresponds to the differentiated organic structure of the ideal Bahai community, so the theology of the state is matched by a parallel ecclesiology. Finally, the same pattern is found in the integration of diverse attributes and multiple citizenships in the human person. Thus the differentiation of church and state in Bahai political theology is related to metaphysics, eschatology, ecclesiology and anthropology, as variations on one theme, and this theme in itself has a clear relationship to the *kerygma* of the Bahai teachings, which is unity. An additional reason for interest is that this teaching is argued, and not simply revealed as the divine fiat, and it is argued in neoplatonic terms which are a common language for Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Perhaps the argument will prove transferable.

*Glory be unto Him who hath produced growth in the
adjoining fields of various natures!
Glory be unto Him who irrigated them with the same waters
gushing forth from that Fountain!*

(Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha 398)

Glory be to Him Who has created all the pairs,
of such things as earth produces,
and out of men themselves,
and of things beyond their ken.

Quran 36:36.

