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A common language
for postmodern political theologies

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Introduction

My name is Sen McGlinn, and I was born in New Zealand half a century ago. My mother was and is a Methodist. I attended an Anglican secondary school and came in contact with the Quran at the age of 13 and with the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order 3 years later, followed by the Bahá'í community, which I joined at the age of 17. About 10 years later I began two degrees, in English and Theology. The courses for the theology degree, which I never completed, were partly in a Presbyterian institution, partly in a Seminary, and partly at the university in a secular framework. Since then I have moved to the Netherlands and completed a 4-year degree in Islamic Studies at the University of Leiden, with a specialisation in Shia Islam and a minor in Persian. My dissertation, Church and State is distributed through Kalimat Press.

Throughout these various studies I have been a member of the Bahá'í community, and my writing is primarily intended for Bahá'í readers, although there is also an element of world theology in it. In late 2005, shortly after I had completed Church and State, I was expelled from formal membership of the Bahá'í community. That is

not important here, but it does reinforce something I would want to say anyway: while my work is 'faith seeking understanding,' I do not represent the Bahá'í community in any formal sense: these are simply the views and questions of one Bahá'í. The Bahá'í community is like most Christian communities (but unlike most Muslim and Jewish communities), in that formal learning in the religious sciences does not create any presumption of authority in the Bahá'í community. Quite the reverse in fact.

Outline

My text -- from which I will immediately depart -- is 1st Corinthians 12:4-6

"... there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who works all in all."

What I hope to show is that a particular reinterpretation of neo-platonic emanation theology, and an appropriation of the organic metaphor for society to refer to a harmony of distinct organs, can be used in the theologies of all the monotheist faiths, and can help believers to feel at home in the world as it is, and to see what the divine Will requires in this world. This means accepting the pluralism of normative orders. It asks religion to renounce any claim to have a unique dignity before God that is denied to politics or science. It implies limits to what a political theology can claim. And it puts the burden of coordinating the whole not in any one project, but on the mystery of the person, both human and divine.

1. Globalisation and the post-modern

First I want to outline what I think are the key dynamics of globalisation: functional differentiation, individualisation and feminisation, global integration, pluralism and relativism. This will also explain what I mean by 'postmodern' society.

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 and our pattern of life, which in turn demand changes in our world-view: the result is not just a globally extended modern society but a new kind of society, 'postmodern society.'

The key dynamic of globalisation is the progressive **differentiation** of different spheres of social life. The emergence of religions of transcendence in the axial age was a critical step: the transcendent creates the not-transcendent, and the possibility of having 'worldly' and 'spiritual' aspects of life. In 'modern' times, the institutions of politics, economics, religion and science gained greater autonomy. 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. 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" which they spawned. The sense that this pluralism is wrong seems to have been deep-seated. In the 20th century, communism and fascism 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 purpose is to help believers to feel at home in the world as it is, and to see the divine Will in the world as it is.

A small digression here: postmodern theologies have been concerned, among other things, with the implications of pluralism within the religious order, for particular truth claims and for the possibility of theology itself. In my view, postmodern theology should be even more interested in explaining the pluralism of normative orders, in the first place because this is a more existential issue for those we serve, and in the second place because it points to a more modest ambition for theology, to a smaller scope within which theology is not only possible but actually useful.

The multiple roles of the individual as citizen, fellow-believer, scientist and economic agent 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. 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 and belonging in each sphere.

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.

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.

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, something that differentiates one

individual from another and assures each of their individuality. This entails a privatisation of religion, creating a private sphere within which religious values and a sectarian 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, which I have pursued, is for a religion to re-invent itself in terms of globalisation, to offer itself as a means of giving modest meanings to post-modern society.

Spreading individual identity across multiple worlds causes a good deal of stress. How much stress 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 then 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. The Bahai teachings provide a window through which we can 'learn to see' how religion could work in a postmodern society, and I hope that we will then see that similar teachings or the materials for them are found in other religious traditions. 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 is **Global integration**: the 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. Functional differentiation within society, and global integration across what were, in the modern age, separate national societies, are two parts of the same process which is producing a global postmodern society.

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 political, cultural and economic systems. When we speak of 'postmodernism' in philosophy and the Fine Arts, we are referring mainly to this aspect of globalisation. As intercultural and interreligious contacts and migration relativize truth claims and social norms, it becomes harder to find ideological support for social structures. Indeed ideology, in the sense of an explanation and justification of an entire social order, is passé. And so is political theology, if it pretends to show the way for an entire social order.

2. The limits of theology

I suggest that postmodern political theology has to take place within a world view in which society is recognised as 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. "There are differences of administrations, but the same Lord."

The idea of different logics implies that no explanation of the whole system -- whether that be a theological explanation of society 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.

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.

The same limitation applies to 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 in religion, it cannot claim to describe how they ought to appear in their own lights. Religion is not everything, although it may speak of everything.

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.

3. The organic metaphor

Society has been presented as something analogous to a person, 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 mere 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 this metaphor, 'society is like a body,' for a new purpose. First, I want to invite you 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 body is a polysystem: its subsystems have distinct characters. The harmony of the parts cannot be attributed to the command of any one organ: it derives from transcendent and indefinable properties, 'being a being,' and 'having life:' qualities that cannot be located, but cannot be denied. "...there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit," and the Spirit is found everywhere and located nowhere.

Reinterpreted in this way, the metaphor of organic unity becomes a model of the postmodern society, which is a 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. Such an organic unity characterises the relationship between the religious and civil organs of Baha'u'llah's ideal world order -- Baha'u'llah and his son Abdu'l-Baha were among the first in Middle East to advocate the separation of church and state and the independence of science from religion: they can be regarded without exaggeration as the prophets of postmodernity.

In a truly integrated society, could the harmony of permanently differentiated organs also describe the relations between the religious, political, commercial, scientific, and cultural

enterprises, and the world of nature? Could it not provide a political theology of the postmodern society? The co-ordination of organs within an organic structure is the necessary result of the harmony between their various natures: it is not imposed by one organ upon the others. The differences between the organs, their specialisation by nature and function, create their need for one another and thus the possibility of unity. Differences are therefore not antagonistic to unity. Difference is not to be transcended, ignored, subsumed or otherwise kept within bounds: in an organic social model the essential differences (in the full neoplatonic sense) constitute the unity.

Organic unity is a relationship of harmony with an Other, or Others, based on underlying differences. A monist social model -- whether it be of an absolutist state or a theocratic church -- recognises no Other and is therefore loveless. Moreover, Unicity is proper to God alone, in a Godhead that we may contemplate but not understand. Twoness, and the endless permutations of 'the many,' are proper to creation. Attempts to create monist social structures are therefore implicitly idolatrous, as well as loveless.

Applying the model of organic unity, and the divine decree of multiplicity, to social structures implies breaking the monopoly of religious institutions on the management of the sacred. It also has implications for ecclesiology. Within the Bahai community's model of itself there are various organs with different functions. No one institution can claim to be the one channel of the spirit. Each of the organs has its own legitimisation directly from the Bahai scriptures. And the microcosm of religious community is reflected in the social macrocosm: according to the Bahai scriptures, the art of

government, the creative arts, and science do not have to shelter under the religious umbrella to be graced: each has already been granted the rank and dignity of a divine institution, directly from the source.

4. An emanation theology

Baha'u'llah says: "... all things, in their inmost reality, testify to the revelation of the names and attributes of God within them." (Baha'u'llah, in the Kitab-e Iqan)

Behind this there lies a rather precise theological system. Every existing thing exists because it manifests attributes of God, and it exists to manifest those attributes as perfectly as its own station permits. The human person has the unique potential to manifest all of these attributes, and also to perceive these realities or essences by the power of the mind and to understand the universal principles that flow from the relations between them.

The attributes or names of God emanate from the unknowable Godhead through successive levels of realisation in much the same way as ideas, in platonic philosophy, exist first in the world of forms and are then realised, to a greater or lesser degree, in the material world. For instance, the attribute of 'sovereignty' is expressed in the angelic realms in the form of beings whom Baha'u'llah refers to as the "monarchs of the realms of the Kingdom." At another level, the 'Manifestations of God' (the founders of religions) embody this attribute, as does human government, and archetypically monarchs. But the sovereignty of religious leaders, including the Messiah, operates in a different dimension to that of human governments: the latter is not simply a

diminished or delegated version of the former. Sovereignty is reflected in yet another way in religious institutions, and in yet another way in the sovereignty of any individual who 'knows with his own knowledge,' who has made an epistemological declaration of independence. Thus a single attribute, sovereignty, shining from the Godhead through the worlds of God, is refracted from the diverse realities in various shapes and colours in which we can still recognise an original resemblance. Conversely, human beings can respond to the sovereignty of God in all these forms in appropriate ways: by adoring the Godhead, by recognising and following the Person in whom God's will is revealed, by obeying governments and fulfilling the duties of good citizenship, by respecting the sanctity of conscience. While the one attribute can be recognised in all these forms, the responses to it must differ: it would be equally improper to respond to an encounter with the Messiah by calling for a vote, or to respond to an earthly government with adoration.

This process of emanation is not a question of successive dilution as one moves 'further' from the Godhead, but rather of differing manifestation of the attributes of God in differing materials. The responses required therefore differ in kind, and not just in degree.

Since human individuals can manifest attributes of God such as generosity, creativity, knowledge and sovereignty, human acts can also do so, for a reality that does not drive towards active expression is no reality at all. If human acts manifest the attributes of God, so do human projects and the social organs that embody them. Charity reflects the name of God 'the Giver,' as Baha'u'llah says: "To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it

with him that adorneth himself with My virtues." Those who discover and apply useful technologies, according to Baha'u'llah, are "the exponents of His Name 'the Fashioner' amidst mankind" and should be respected. Similarly the arts reflect 'the Creator,' scientific research reflects 'questions' (which in Bahai theology is an attribute of God), systematic knowledge reflects 'the All-knowing,' and the civil state reflects the sovereignty of God the King. This is the first step in providing a theo-logical grounding for the model of the organic unity of social structures that I have proposed.

The second step in building a theological justification of the existence of the state is to propose that the names and attributes of God are ontologically distinct. According to the apophatic theology common to all the Western religious traditions, the Godhead is unknowable and indescribable. So is the inner individuality of any person. The names that are attributed to God are applied only by God's permission, and in the sense of the double negative: 'God the forgiving' is a shorthand for 'God's self-revelation in history permits us to say that our God is not an unforgiving God.' But the story does not stop with what we can not know. We can both recognise and manifest attributes such as goodness, mercy and sovereignty: the realities or essences of things which are also the names of God. These attributes are not themselves the Godhead, being emanated from God and multiple. But if all the attributes are created, there must be real distinctions between them, or God would have created Godself.

We can know the attributes, and can enter the realm of ideas and divine names (called the Kingdom of Names) through the power of reason and what Coleridge calls the 'secondary

imagination.' Therefore there must be an unbridgeable gap between the names and attributes and the Godhead itself. Multiplicity and interrelation are proper to the creation, while unicity is proper to the Godhead. Multiplicity and interrelation require ontological distinction. To consider that the distinctions between the divine attributes are merely artefacts of human languages would imply that unicity is not unique to the Godhead, but extends to this realm, which in turn is accessible to our reason. The implication would be that we can reason our way to God. Moreover, since the emanation of the Kingdom of Names constitutes creation and we are part of that creation, unicity would then extend to ourselves, and we would conclude that we are God. Neither of these is an acceptable conclusion within the framework of monotheist religion. Therefore it is the path of greater piety to suppose that unicity is not a property of the Kingdom of Names: in other words that the attributes of God are ontologically distinct.

Then it follows that there is some distinct reality, variously called the sovereignty or majesty or dominion of God, or the name 'God the King' (here we encounter the inadequacy of language and the variety of languages), and there is another reality which is God the Revealer, and which is distinct from the first, but closely related to it. And it follows that the Kingdom of God is growing where church and state also are distinct, but closely related; where science seeks to embody the name of God 'the Questioner' and religion does not interfere; where the state does not interfere with the economic systems that embody the name of God 'The Provider', but, as is appropriate for 'The Sovereign', does keep a watchful eye on Justice.

Let me recap that: we have the Person of God whom we encounter as a person, a mystery. And we have distinct names and attributes of God: God is the King, the Questioner, the Provider, the Revealer, the Judge: these point towards that Person who is a mystery. We accept that these attributes must be distinct from one another (because Unicity is of God), and can therefore relate to one another, even if we have no assurance that we have words that correspond precisely to actual attributes. Creation exists so that God may be known, it exists to manifest attributes, and it does so by unfolding in time. Human persons (whom we model on the perfect exemplars, not on any defective examples we may encounter) are mysteries who can manifest all these attributes. They manifest them by acting, so human acts manifest one or more attributes of God (or display the lack of these attributes). Human acts are also embodied in institutions (in the widest sociological sense). Human history shows an unfolding, from fairly simple societies in which the differences between the acts are latent or implicit, to a complex polysystem in which different parts of the social order function according to different logics, and relate to one another. The attributes of God are logics of social institutions, and the whole is held together not by the dominance of one, but by the network of relationships between these logics (which need one another since each is partial), by the human persons that combine these logics within themselves, and by the Person of God to whom they all point.

5. Implications

I have used the premises of monotheistic religion, and a neoplatonic metaphysics, to provide a religious rationale for embracing the multi-centred post-modern society, and for rejecting social models in which one or other human project is supposed to serve as co-ordinator and standard of value for all others. To use the anthropological metaphor again, the life of the body is not resident in a single organ, but it underlies their continuing ability to relate. This explicitly means that religion renounces any claim to have a unique dignity before God. Religious institutions have no monopoly on the sacred. Religion recognises that the project of civil government has an inherent right to exist, and not merely as a necessary evil, to punish the wrongdoer, or as a mediator to ensure civil rights in a religiously plural society, but as part of the divine order of things. Likewise science and the search for knowledge is not a necessity imposed by a fallen world, it is part of the divine order. The co-ordination of the organs in the organic body politic results from the inherent harmony between the logics proper to each, and this harmony has two causes: an ultimate cause, which is that the names of God are distinct but have common reference to the Person of one God, and an immediate cause in the internal harmony of the human agents. Human persons, like the divine person, are the united referents underlying the diversity of attributes. Each person potentially embodies all of the attributes of God, and so holds multiple citizenship of all of these cities, functioning and developing in each according to its laws, harmonising them within his or her own person. This is in

accordance with the individualism of the Bahai writings, and the progressive individualisation of post-modern society.

This neoplatonic language and the organic metaphor are not applicable only to political theology: it can also be used for a religious anthropology and for ecclesiology (in the Bahai version at least), by giving them all the same metaphysical grounding, which in turn is the pattern for eschatology. On this basis, political theology can be integrated in a systematic theology. In other words, there is a congruence between the images of how society is and should be, of what a human person is and should be, of what a religious community is and should be, and of the metaphysical realm, life after death, and eschatology. In all of these "... there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who works all in all." It may be that this approach can be of use for those of other faiths.

6. Questions for discussion:

- Does this actually help the believer to understand how there can be one God, but a differentiated society?
- Have I reinvented the wheel?
- Are there particular barriers, in Christian, Jewish and Muslim theologies, to using this emanation theology and organic social model to help believers feel at home in postmodern social structures?
- Have I reinvented polytheism -- or at least that form of polytheism in which there is an unknowable high God and numerous specialised deities ? If so, does it matter ?