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Subject:	Civil Rights and the Baha'i Faith
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> The issue, as I understand it, is to what extent should a religious
> group involve itself in decision-making within a secular society > particularly over issues where both moral and civil-rights issues
> are involved.

I have no trouble with political activism on the part of Bahais or other believers -- in fact I think it is a religious duty. I've argued for it in _Church and State_, and Abdu'l-Baha is quite emphatic:

O thou servant of Baha'! Thou hast asked regarding the political affairs. In the United States it is necessary that the citizens shall take part in elections. This is a necessary matter and no excuse from it is possible. ... Now, as the government of America is a republican form of government, it is necessary that all the citizens shall take part in the elections of officers and take part in the affairs of the republic.

(Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha v2, p. 342-3)

but this not to say that every form of political activism is good. It has first of all to be good politics, and then meet the specific requirements of Bahai teachings.

For instance, a Bahai or Christian may take part in scientific debate, and say, "My scriptures, confirmed by my personal spiritual experience, tell me X. This must be included as data in the discussion." It would not be good science, because it is not in accordance with the inherent logic in the practice of science, which requires that claims should be based on verifiable information and that causation has to plausibly argued in terms of known facts and laws. Good science is not defined by correct outcomes (how could we know what are correct outcomes?) but by having an ongoing process that accords with the inherent logic of science, and excludes input that is contrary to that logic. Similarly, the majority in a democratic society might decide to limit the retail price of bread, but leave the price of flour to market forces. The decision might be in accordance with the formal procedures of the society, but it would be bad economics: it fails to recognise the inherent laws that govern an economic system.

Politics itself is such a system, with its own inherent logic, undergirding a process which ought to be based on public rationality, that is, on the presentation of proposals and arguments whose validity is judged against the criterion of the well-being of the society. Public rationality is secular: like science, it cannot admit private inspiration as a valid input. This is the first reason why I think it is wrong for a religious group to bring its own scriptures and moral viewpoints into the political debate: "it is a sin," and "Baha'u'llah says so" are not political arguments. And such arguments will be ignored, they are just evidence that the speaker does not understand what politics is.

But there is a second aspect: the criterion in politics should be the well-being of society. If a religious group, large or small, approaches politics as an arena in which it can win something for its good from society, this is bad politics, even if they follow all the rules and gain a majority. Such a religious group is entering politics at its basest end, as a battle of gimme gimme gimme and the most votes wins. Divine politics should operate at a higher level, at which each participant considers himself or herself as a public servant and not as their own advocate, or advocate for their own group.

School education also has its inherent logic, defined by its aim: to equip people, especially children, to live in society, contribute to it, and to take responsibility for their own further education and development. Just as a political debate about the price of bread has to take the laws of economics into account, a political debate about the contents of education has first to be good politics (secular, private inspiration is not a valid argument) and has to take the purpose of education itself as a starting point. Which religious or ethnic or other groups have majorities in the society should not be relevant. If we are doing good politics about education, the question is not gimme gimme and who has the most votes, it is, "what do the children need to live in society, contribute to it, and to take responsibility for themselves?" What do the children need --remembering that as an exercise in public rationality, "God says children need ..." is not an argument.

Among the things they need to know is that homosexual orientations are naturally occurring, and that they are not in themselves harmful to the person or society. They need to know what attitudes their own society, ethnicities or religious groups have had to homosexuality, and what harm these have done to individuals and society. They need to understand homophobia and how it is used politically and socially, just as they need to know how racial and ethnic prejudices are used for political and social gain.

They also need to know about the various religious and ideological elements in their society, and in its past, and learn how to make philosophical and religious arguments in general, how to process claims and make their own decisions. This need is met, in part, by religious education in schools. SACRE, the standing advisory council for religious education, is supposed to advise on the contents of religious education. For this purpose it includes representatives from religious communities. Its mandate can be found here:

http://tinyurl.com/yv3ya6

SACRE attempted to project its influence into the teaching of sexuality in schools (in a context in which Labour basically supported the inclusion of homosexuality in the syllabus, and the Tories were against), arguing not on the basis of what the children need, but what its members believe. The action was improper, and the association of the National Spiritual Assembly with it was improper. The NSA's statement is found here:

http://bahai-library.com/nsa/homosexuality.uk.html

In addition to the general principles above, each religion also has its own teachings about what kinds of political intervention is good, for the believer and for the religious institutions. In the Bahai case, the religious leadership has a more tightly restricted role than the individual. First, it does have a mandate to engage in public moral issues:

My intention, with these words, is not that religion (diin) has any business in politics (siyaasat). Religion has no jurisdiction or involvement in political matters, for religion is related to spirits and to ecstasy, while politics relates to the body. Therefore the leaders of religions (ru'saa'-ye adyaan) should not be involved in political matters, but should busy themselves with rectifying the morals of the community (mellat). They admonish, and excite the desire and appetite for piety. They sustain the morals of the community. They give spiritual understanding to the souls. They teach the [religious] sciences, but they have no involvement with political matters, for all time (abadan). Baha'u'llah has commanded this. In the Gospels it is said, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

But the intention was this: in Iran the righteous Bahai officials pay the closest attention to justice because they fear the wrath of God, and hope for the mercy of God. However there are others who have no scruples at all ... (my translation from Khitabat-e Abdu'l-Baha 182)

The last section shows that believers are expected to bring their values and rectitude into their public service (of which political debate is, ideally, a variety). The first paragraph sets out Abdu'l-Baha's teachings about the limitations to the role of leaders of religion: the Persian term does not imply only priest or only ulama. They do have a role in "rectifying the morals of the community (mellat)," which could refer to the religious community only, or the nation. Mellat began to be used in Persian to refer to 'nation' and the people of a nation in the run-up to the constitutional revolution. I think it is probable that it means only the religious community here: the leaders of the religions (not the plural) are each responsible for elevating the morals of [their own] community.

In any case, if this mandate is national, it is limited as to its procedure:

If you refer to history, you would find countless examples of this sort, all based on the involvement of religious leaders in political matters. These souls are the fountainhead of the interpretation of God's commandments, not of implementation. That is, when the government requests an explanation concerning the requirements of the Law of God and the realities of the divine ordinances, in principle or in a specific case, they must explain what has been deduced, of the commands of God, and what is in accordance with the law of God. Apart from this, what awareness do they have of questions of leadership and social development, (Abdu'l-Baha, Sermon on the Art of Governance) Christian and Muslim and Hindu and Jewish leaders would not necessarily subscribe to this teaching. But a Bahai institution must accept it: the institution is allowed to express an opinion only about what religious teachings require (thus not about how these should be reflected in concrete policies: "our Law forbids alcohol and drug use" is acceptable, but "the state should forbid alcohol and drug use" is unacceptable). And it is to express its understanding only when asked by the government. A request from an advisory committee on religious education, for support for its stand on the contents of sexual education, fails both criteria, because SACRE was acting outside its government mandate, and was seeking to have its policy proposals endorsed by government.

This explains why the NSA's intervention was politically wrong, and -in Bahai terms -- religiously wrong. What has heated the debate is that it is also offensive, to Bahais, because it is presented in public not as the NSA's own view, but as the view of all Bahais. They say, for instance : "Baha'is feel ... that there should be no difficulty about [religious communities] standing together against the values being promoted by the forces of secularism in our society." I object to being tarred with the same brush as the NSA paints itself, and I take the opportunity of repudiating the views that the NSA has expressed.

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