

Some people have objected to my warning to the reader, on the first page of *Church and State*, that “my stance is not that of a historian or academic scholar of the science of religion, but of a Bahai theologian...” Is Bahai theology permissible?

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From: Sen McGlinn
To: self
Subject: theology
Date sent: Mon, 01 Jan 2007 20:14:08 +0100

XX (post 57) wrote:

- > we can theologize all we want. Doing so from a
- > standpoint/status of any authority, academic,
- > sacerdotal and/or otherwise is not a Baha'i practice.

So Bahais generally can do theology, but academics may not? Do you have chapter and verse where this rule is written?

Obviously no-one can speak with any authority. The first words of the first line of the first page of *Church and State* are "This book presents my own understanding ..." and on page 2 "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."

Providing they clearly say that they have no special authority, I do not see why academics should not have the same status in the Bahai community as non-academics, or why I as an MA student should be counted as an academic. Can't I count as a Joe Blog and have full rights? Do I have to renounce my university degrees to be acceptable in the community?

- > Have no knowledge any more than any else.

But that's the crunch. Some people do have more and some less knowledge. Abdu'l-Baha writes:

Those eminent divines and men of learning who walk the straight pathway ... are alert to the present need and they understand the requirements of modern times, and certainly devote all their energies toward encouraging the advancement of learning and civilization. "Are they equal, those who know, and those who do not know?... Or is the darkness equal with the light?" [Qur'an 39:12; 13:17.] (The Secret of Divine Civilization, pp. 32-3)

The problem is not just 'what are the Bahai teachings about knowledge and learning' but more practically: how do we continue to treat each other as equal members of the community, but without denying the obvious fact that some know more about some subjects than other people do (so we can learn from one another). How do we *not* simply replicate the structures of other religious communities, and human communities generally, where knowledge is power? We could all take a vow of equal ignorance, but that is not an adequate solution. The community has to learn not to feel threatened by knowledge differences.

IMO:

> the mantle of >Baha'i theologian< and people may think you have
> authority which to no one has been given. Let me use Marx and Hegel
> as an analogy. Neither were revolutionaries; indeed Marx was the
> antithesis of a member of the working class in his personal life.

There are two paths to solving this problem. One is to ban new ideas and censor publication and limit education, and be vigilant to be safe. The other is to combat bad ideas with good ideas, which requires open debate and more education, and staying dynamic to be safe. It is not possible to compromise halfway between these paths because they go in opposite directions. I think the second path is the way to go.

No Bahai theologian I know of - - Udo Schaeffer, Julio Savi and Jack McLean being among the better known - - has *ever* even once claimed any authority. The issue would not even exist if it were not for stereotypes and prejudices about what 'academics' are like. There's a challenge - find any example of a Bahai theologian or historian or scholar in any other field who has claimed to be any more or better than anyone else.

- > am truly surprised that someone so well read,
- > should have missed the >tenor< of what the
- > writings have to say about the accreting theologies
- > and dangerous theologians of the past.

"He Who is the Seal of the Prophets hath said: "Increase my wonder and amazement at Thee, O God!" " (Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 162)

It gets even more surprising than this, when we look for answers in the Writings instead of just waving them round in a general way. So show me where this is in the Writings. Come with chapter and verse, and build an argument. That's how to do theology. I suspect that you will find that it is the leaders of religion who are most frequently condemned: where Baha'u'llah encountered real theological objections and questions, he explained and reasoned with the people rather than condemning them. The few theologians who are mentioned (such as Luther in Secret of Divine Civilization) are praised. Others are condemned for particular acts, or for hypocrisy, for wealth pomp and pomposity, for interference in political affairs rather than for being theologians.

The interpretation of the verses is made more difficult by the fact that the dominant school of Shiah theology in Baha'u'llah's time, the usulis, had made the authority of the religious scholars a point of doctrine. Laymen were required to find a mujtahid and follow his rulings. The minority school, the akhbaris, rejected this, and the early Shaykhis, Babi and Bahais tended to come from the akhbari school. Obviously Baha'u'llah rejected the doctrine of imitation. So how can we know that usuli theologians are being condemned for doing theology rather than for claiming authority?

But I don't want to do your research for you: if you really think this is in the writings somewhere, find the supporting verses, find the verses that seem to point in the other way, and show what you think is the best way of understanding the whole.

Shoghi Effendi's Promised Day is come, from page 77 ("Leaders of religion,") to page 110 can serve as a model of how to construct an argument based on scriptures. He has also collected a hundred or so examples of condemnations of the clergy and religious leaders, so he's done a lot of your work for you. But he concludes on pp 109-110:

Nor should it be thought for a moment that the followers of Baha'u'llah either seek to degrade or even belittle the rank of the world's religious leaders, whether Christian, Muslim, or of any other denominations, should their conduct conform to the professions, and be worthy of the position they occupy. "Those divines," Baha'u'llah has affirmed, ". . . who are truly adorned with the ornament of knowledge and of a goodly character are, verily, as a head to the body of the world, and as eyes to the nations. The guidance of men hath, at all times, been and is dependent upon these blessed souls." And again: "The divine whose conduct is upright, and the sage who is just, are as the spirit unto the body of the world. Well is it with that divine whose head is attired with the crown of justice, and whose temple is adorned with the ornament of equity." And yet again: "The divine who hath seized and quaffed the most holy Wine, in the name of the sovereign Ordainer, is as an eye unto the world. Well is it with them who obey him, and call him to remembrance." "Great is the blessedness of that divine," He, in another connection, has written, "that hath not allowed knowledge to become a veil between him and the One Who is the Object of all knowledge, and who, when the Self-Subsisting appeared, hath turned with a beaming face towards Him. He, in truth, is numbered with the learned. The inmates of Paradise seek the blessing of his breath, and his lamp sheddeth its radiance over all who are in heaven and on earth. He, verily, is numbered with the inheritors of the Prophets. He that beholdeth him hath, verily, beheld the True One, and he that turneth towards him hath, verily, turned towards God, the Almighty, the All-Wise." "Respect ye the divines amongst you," is His exhortation, "They whose acts conform to the knowledge they possess, who observe the statutes of God, and decree the things God hath decreed in the Book. Know ye that they are the lamps of guidance betwixt earth and heaven. They that have no consideration for the position and merit of the divines amongst them have, verily, altered the bounty of God vouchsafed unto them."