

The Bahai Writings are quite emphatic that the 'ulama and clergy should not interfere in politics. Does this apply to the House of Justice as well? Is it priests who should not do politics, or is it religious institutions in general? Does the Bahai Faith preach one rule that Christianity and Islam should follow, and have another rule in mind for itself, ultimately?

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To: XX, tarikh  
Subject: Sharî`a versus Walâya: the Struggle for the Soul of Sh `ism  
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- > All of this sounds to me like a strong condemnation of the
- > involvement of religious professionals in political matters. They
- > have a role in giving advice and clarifying what the scripture says
- > but no role in governance and implementation of policy.

Yes, that is how I understand it. The social involvement of religious leaders is advocated (of which more later), but their political role in the narrow sense of politics is limited to 'speaking from the scriptures' - saying what they understand religious principle requires. They have a consultative not a commanding role.

We should distinguish Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha's secularism from anti-clericalism, and we can do this by seeing that the exclusion of religious leaders from exercising political power applies not just to muslim religious experts (ulama) but to religious leaders in general (ru'saa-ye diin) and specifically to the Bahai elected bodies, which are NOT clerical or expert (though they may be professionals, in as much they are paid in some cases).

Compare this passage in the risaleh-ye siyasiyyeh:

If you refer to history, you would find countless examples of this [negative] sort, all based on the involvement of religious leaders [(ru'saa-ye diin)] in political matters. These souls are the fountainhead of the interpretation of God's commandments (tashrii`), not of implementation (tanfiidh). That is, when the government requests an explanation concerning the requirements of

the Law of God and the realities of the divine ordinances ... they must explain what has been deduced of the commands of God, and what is in accordance with the law of God.

With this one from the Will and Testament:

The legislative body [tashrii`] must reinforce the executive [tanfiidh], the executive must aid and assist the legislative body so that through the close union and harmony of these two forces, the foundation of fairness and justice may become firm and strong, that all the regions of the world may become even as Paradise itself.

The text is on page 12 line 7 of the pdf available from the world Centre. It comes just after the section on the House of Justice, and the Will and Testament is addressed to the Bahais: it must therefore include the Bahai institutions in the tashrii`. So your suggestion that the principle applies only to a clerical religious leadership cannot stand.

Another argument showing that the relevant principle is the separation of the religious and political spheres, and not the exclusion of clergy from public life, can be found in section 6 of the risalih-ye siyasiyyih, which begins "The second type of educator." Here he includes Prophets and scriptures, spiritual souls and religious scholars (ulama) as part of the second type. The inclusion of the Prophets is significant (far from being professional clergy, they have usually suffered impoverishment), and is in line with Baha'u'llah's explanation of the two sovereignties, in part 2 of the Iqan. Even the prophets and manifestations are included in the religious power, of which he says:

[their] sacred duties are rooted in spiritual, divine matters, and in ethical considerations. They have not been linked with material honours, political affairs or worldly matters. ... They have never had any role to play in questions of the government and the governed, of ruling and being ruled. They are ones chosen by the sweet-scented breezes of God, the ones closest to the overflowing waters of the spirit of eternity. They do not seek any role in other matters, and they do not urge the steed of ambition in the arena of greed and power. For matters of politics and government, of the kingdom and of subjects have a specified source and a respected place to which they refer, while guidance, religion,

insight, education, and the promotion of the morals and virtues of humanity have a sacred centre and designated spring. These souls have nothing to do with political affairs, nor do they seek any involvement.

A third argument for the universality of the principle is that the texts Abdu'l-Baha cites in the Risaleh-ye Siyasiyyah are drawn from Christian, Islamic and Baha'i scriptures. These three communities have quite different forms of religious leadership, both in functions and in the way individuals become leaders. It is simpler (Occam's razor) to understand this as a universal principle that religion and politics are two separate spheres, are two distinct powers (qoveh), rather than supposing that Abdu'l-Baha is objecting only to a particular aspect of Usuli Shiah practice. If his objection was only to them being "religious professionals" - ie getting paid - would he not have stipulated that the Bahai teachers, members of the houses of justice etc cannot be paid? This was a misunderstanding among the early western Bahais: the principle of separation was misunderstood as an objection to having paid religious workers, and the Bahais then had problems understanding why Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi permitted it, and even paid them themselves.

> Of course Baha'u'llah called on religious leaders to adopt a  
> positive role as long as they have power and influence as indeed he  
> also called upon despotic kings of his time. But that does not mean  
> that he endorsed the continuation of their role.

Monarchy is a good example to take. Some of the early western believers who could not accept the doctrine of separation of church and state developed a coping mechanism, to deal with the fact that the Bahai scriptures plainly acknowledged the role of kings and rulers and make praying for them obligatory, even revealing prayers for the purpose. They said that this was only for now, that in the long run monarchy would be abolished. Shoghi Effendi responded in *The Promised Day is Come* with a long compilation of scriptural texts, which he introduces:

Let none, however, mistake or unwittingly misrepresent the purpose of Baha'u'llah. Severe as has been His condemnation pronounced against those sovereigns who persecuted Him, and however strict the censure expressed collectively against those who failed signally in their clear duty to investigate the truth of His Faith

and to restrain the hand of the wrongdoer, His teachings embody no principle that can, in any way, be construed as a repudiation, or even a disparagement, however veiled, of the institution of kingship.

Are you not taking essentially the same position with regard to religious leaderships? In the Risaleh-ye Siyasiyyah and in other texts, some of which I cited last time, Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha praise \*good\* ulama and other religious leaders and endorse their social role and a consultative role in politics. You respond that this is only 'for now' - it is not the essential or long-term objective. But can you find evidence to support that? Is it not simply a coping mechanism on your part, to cover the awkward fact that the Bahai scriptures do not say what you expect them to?

Shoghi Effendi has again done our research work for us, in PDC, where he introduces a long compilation of scriptural passages upholding the dignity and role of the clergy with the words:

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."

Just by reading this, and tracing the citations back to their context in the writings of Baha'u'llah, shows us that his acceptance of the social role of religious leaders is not just temporary bowing to historical necessity -- it is a matter of principle.

- > It seems to me that in any Baha'i system
- > there is no political role at all for religious leaders

But there is a consultative role: you conceded did you not that Abdu'l-Baha endorses this in the Risaleh-ye Siyasiyyah? And I have already posted other quotes to that effect.

- > - and indeed
- > no existence for religious leaders either.

ROFL !!

A religious 'system' but without any leaders?? How long would that stay a system? Obviously the Bahai community stands out among religious communities for its high degree of institutional formalisation, even today, and the Bahai writings envision even more institutional developments in the future (they also envision a Guardianship, which can no longer actively function). The way you tell it, the Bahai community only became really Bahai when the Guardian died -- or was he not a religious leader?

Aren't you going back to the "Bahai faith cannot be organised" paradigm, from nearly 100 years ago? That was based simply on a misunderstanding, long since resolved.

- > I think we are in basic agreement in fact. It is just that when I
- > say "political role" I am speaking about the wielding of power,
- > while you are classing giving advice as a "political role". I will
- > see if the wording of the paper needs tightening up to make this
- > clear.

You said that Abdu'l-Baha "strongly advises the people against giving religious professionals any social or political role ..."

It is not just that this point is wrong as a point of fact, it also affects the basic articulation of your paper. If Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha are not anti-clerical and if they endorse the continuation of religious leaderships and their important social role (and a consultative role in politics in the narrow sense), then they are not simply an extension of the Akhbari current in the struggle for the soul of Shi`ism. More than just a phrase needs rethinking here.

I said earlier that I would come back to the social role of religious leadership. We can not only say that Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha were secularists rather than being anti-clerical, we can say something about what \*kind\* of secularists they were. In the Will and Testament Abdu'l-Baha says:

The legislative body [tashrii`] must reinforce the executive

[tanfiidh], the executive must aid and assist the legislative body so that \*\*through the close union and harmony of these two forces,\*\* the foundation of fairness and justice may become firm and strong, that all the regions of the world may become even as Paradise itself.

and in the Risaleh-ye Siyasiyyeh:

"The religious law is like the spirit of life,  
the government is the locus of the force of deliverance.  
The religious law is the shining sun,  
and government is the clouds of April.  
... One has illuminated the world of the soul,  
the other caused the earth to flower.

...

The point is this, that each of these two signs of grandeur is the aid and assistant of the other, like milk and honey, or the twins of Gemini in the sky. ..."

And from Baha'u'llah, in the Lawh-e Maqsuud:

Our hope is that the world's religious leaders and the rulers thereof will unitedly arise for the reformation of this age ...  
Let them ... take counsel together ...

and in the Lawh-e Duniyaa:

Certain laws and principles are necessary and indispensable for Persia. However, it is fitting that these measures should be adopted in conformity with the considered views of His Majesty ... and of the learned divines and of the high-ranking rulers. ... they should hold fast to the cord of consultation

(And as you will be aware, Shoghi Effendi endorses the establishment of the Bahai Faith as the state religion, although that is outside the period covered by your paper.)

What this points to, to me, is a British rather than an American model of secularism, one in which the state respects freedom of conscience and in which the religious leadership does not interfere in the "implementation" side of politics, but in which they nevertheless recognise and respect one another and actively work together. Bahai participation in this cooperation is not going to be facilitated if

the Bahai community is presented as anti-clerical or even as having no leadership. The governments at all levels will have to know who to call, if and when they want "an explanation concerning the requirements of the Law of God and the realities of the divine ordinances, in principle or in a specific case." Whoever the Bahai representatives may be (Counsellors I think, but the UHJ will have to decide that), they will have to sit down with imams and ayatollahs, ministers and priests, and other religious leaders.

I think the paper should emphasise the way Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha recast the old akhbari-usuli tension in terms of the principle of secularism, which moved the whole issue from the medieval to the modern world - and how they succeeded in bringing many families from Akhbari-Shaykhi-Babi backgrounds into modernity with them. It's a paradigm shift: the arguments of both schools had hit a dead end, one because the available akhbar date from another age, the other because the spread of literacy, printing and the spirit of enquiry made everyone a mujtahid, at least in his own mind. Baha'u'llah does not fiddle with the details, he sweeps them from the table and starts anew

Best wishes  
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