

Some thoughts on how the institutionalization of religion, and freedom in religion, fit together. This was in response to one of those nasty messages that attribute various silly ideas to me, and then condemn me for them. Usually I do not respond, but this one happened to come when I was thinking about the importance of institutions, and the quite peculiar structure of the Bahai institutions, which are quite unlike those of other religions.

Also some thoughts on Garlington's Baha'i Faith in America, which has been subjected to a nasty smear tactic: saying things about the book that are simply untrue, and then discussing them in the same breath with people and books that really are perverse.

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From: Sen & Sonja <sen.sonja@casema.NL>  
To: tARIKH-LIST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU  
Subject: Reprint of Garlington BF in America ?  
Date sent: Tue, 18 Dec 2007 15:21:46 +0100

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XX asked

> is Bill Garlington's book just as depressing and erroneous as this  
> one?

I looked, and found nothing to support the claim that Garlington's book is being reprinted by the Reform Bahais. It seems extremely unlikely: it would be unlike Garlington to have anything to do with people like Glaysher, and Glaysher has a critical review of Garlington on his reformbahai site.

Garlington's book is printed by Praeger, distributed by Kalimat, and has a foreword by Jeffrey Kripal -- it should be given an unprejudiced chance. But it will probably not tell you anything new, it is a text-book overview, similar to Peter Smith's Babi and Bahai Religions, but it has a greater focus on the USA, is at an easier reading level, half the length, and doesn't have Peter Smith's strong sociological basis. Garlington's book is for the public bookshop or the high school or college library, Peter Smith is for the University Library. Both are overviews: they may contain some pieces of new information or theory, but they are not structured as presentations of the author's new research.

In another posting, (17 Dec 2007 at 18:42) you wrote:

> This now brings me to a beautiful place of gratitude that the Faith  
> isn't anything like what Sen describes.

So far as I can make out, you are referring to "the Bahai Faith was being turned into an oppressive organization." These are not my words -- God Forbid -- they are from the advertising blurb for a book by the Reform Bahais, and probably written by YY. My view is quite the opposite to the "no organisation" nitwits that Glaysheer refers to. I think that lasting freedom can only be achieved \*by\* institutionalisation.

By instituting the Houses of Justice, the Guardianship and the Mashriq, Baha'u'llah, the Master and the Guardian were liberating the religious community. In the first case, by taking power out of the hands of the learned, but I think it goes further than that. Just as the end of political despotism was linked to the concept of the separation of the three political powers and other institutions of a civil society, Baha'u'llah has instituted a separation of religious functions: doctrine in the Master and then the Guardianship, administration and law in the Houses of Justice, devotions and ritual in the House of Worship. When these powers are combined in a "church" structure, that church typically cycles through a renaissance, institutional consolidation, rigidity and oppression, breakdown and a new renaissance. Monolithic "church" structures (in any religion) are only intermittently productive, just as the absolute monarchies only intermittently gave liberty and light, under an enlightened ruler at the right time. They have their bright days, but also dark nights.

The separation of powers in a liberal society creates an internal ecology of institutions that can be sensitive and self-correcting and therefore continually productive - in the space of 200 years this organic model has beaten the alternatives hands down. But it looked at first like a very weak model compared to the monist societies and ideologies: in Popper's time, the very viability of an "open society" had to be argued. The organic model of the state was adopted and adapted by various societies. I think we can draw a parallel, and draw hope from it: hope that the Bahai Faith itself will show a way for a religion to have strong institutionalisation and continuity without becoming rigid and going through the boom-bust cycle, and also hope that such an organic structure may be adopted and adapted by other religions, so that religion as a whole may come to play a (largely) consistent positive role in globalised society. This I think is the

shape of the globalised "religious system" : not one religion but an organic model of religion in which worship - because it is separated from religious doctrine and administration - may be the "commons" at the centre of the global village.

That's "the Faith [that] Sen describes." I hope you do not find it too depressing :-)

sen