

This is a series of my postings on Bahai Rants <http://bahairants.com/> from 30 May 2008, following a discussion of my book *Church and State*, which became in effect a question-and-answer session. Since I have often wished that people who post and publish things about me and *Church and State* would check their facts by asking, I think it worth posting – if only to demonstrate my willingness to answer courteous questions.

Among the topics are misunderstandings about the publication of the book, what is meant by theology as distinct from the academic study of religion, what theology and theologians are good for anyway, some examples of Bahai theologians and what they say about Bahai theology, the two spheres of the Guardianship and the House of Justice and what this means for us as readers, and finally disenrollment in the Bahai community, how it works and what it means.

I've worked a little on the spelling and layout, and inserted some explanations in [].

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30 May:

First a couple of points of information:

- *Church and State* was not published by Kalimat, it is self-published, which is normal for university theses and dissertations. Sometimes they are later republished by a publishing house, but the usual thing is that the student publishes them first. Kalimat agreed to distribute most of the copies I had for sale, which made sense because they were printed in the US (half the price of Europe) and US postage is cheaper than European postage. So it says on the cover, “distributed as ‘Studies in the Babi and Bahai Religions’ - volume nineteen.”

Kalimat is both a publisher and a bookseller. It sells books that other publishers have published. Pre-publication review applies only to publishing. If you start a bookshop, as a Bahai, you don't have to get the NSA's permission for every book you stock. But as a Bahai publisher, you do have to get the NSA's approval for every book you publish, that refers to the Bahai Faith. So while it is true to say that every book Kalimat publishes has been approved by the NSA in the USA (an allegation to the contrary, printed in the Dutch national newsletter, is simply misinformed), this does not mean that every book it sells has been approved there.

In the case of *Church and State*, because I live in the Netherlands it would in principle be reviewed by the NSA of the Netherlands. However the NSA here has a policy that Master's dissertations (also called theses here) are exempt, while PhD

theses (called dissertations here) have to be reviewed. Because this was a Master's dissertation, they said I did not require a review. I did tell them I was planning to print 400 copies, and that it would be a substantial book in English, and I suggested the names of Bahais who could review it, but they did not change their decision. So the book has not been reviewed, rather it has been exempted from review.

Since I think the pre-publication review policy should only apply to statements that speak for the Bahai Community, and not to what is just the author's personal opinions, I am perfectly happy that it was exempted. A lot of other books and articles by individual Bahais should also be exempted, which would throw the onus onto their authors to get feedback to make sure that what they publish is accurate and dignified and not too likely to cause misunderstandings.

For those interested, I've put the Foreword and Introduction to Church and State up on my web site as a PDF: <http://www.sonjavank.com/sen/articles.htm> Second one down, and click on the big blue PDF button.

- As for Susan Maneck's critique, this does not refer to my book, but to a paper called "A theology of the State" which was published in a Journal that is called *Church and State*. That seems to have led to some confusion. The critique that was bought up was that I did not, in that article, refer to the rulings of the UHJ relevant to Church and State. The UHJ has offered various pieces of guidance on this issue, but so far as I know only one piece of legislation. This has been cited by the Research Department or the Secretariat to NSAs on various occasions. One example is this, to the Canadian NSA:

"The final point made in your letter concerns the use of the Baha'i system of administration as an example of how an Indian community should conduct its affairs, in light of the fact that the Baha'is may soon be the majority of the people in some Native communities. The Universal House of Justice has pointed out, in response to questions from Baha'i communities in which there has been large-scale growth in village areas, that Baha'i administration and the civil administration are two separate entities; the Local Spiritual Assembly does not automatically become the village council even though most or even all, of the citizens of a village are Baha'is. However, the Baha'is in a village, irrespective of their numbers, can well offer, by precept and by their own practice, the model of consultation as an ideal means by which human beings may carry out their collective decision making within the framework of the oneness of mankind." "When the Baha'i community in a village is a significant proportion of the population, it has a wide range of opportunities to be an example and an encouragement of means of improving the quality of life in the village. Among the initiatives which it might take are measures to foster child education, adult literacy and the training of women to better discharge their responsibilities as mothers and to play an enlarged role in the administrative

and social life of the village; encouragement of the people of the village to join together in devotions, perhaps in the early morning, irrespective of their varieties of religious belief; support of efforts to improve the hygiene and the health of the village, including attention to the provision of pure water, the preservation of cleanliness in the village environment, and education in the harmful effects of narcotic and intoxicating substances. No doubt other possibilities will present themselves to the village Baha'i community and its Local Spiritual Assembly."

That seems pretty clear, and it is precisely in line with what I have found in the Bahai Writings and in the interpretations of Shoghi Effendi. The government and the Bahai Administration are two separate things, as Shoghi Effendi says in the piece Baquia [our Host at Rants] quoted (WOB p 66) and as Abdu'l-Baha says in the *Will and Testament*, and so on. And they are intended to work together, for the good of society. It is an organic unity of the various organs of society that is envisioned, not a church-state or theocracy.

But when reading this ruling regarding local assemblies and local governments, it must be remembered that the UHJ is free to change its rulings. That is why you cannot derive an understanding of the Bahai principles from studying the rulings of the UHJ: the rulings may change. They tell us what is to be done (for now), and often indicate at least part of the reasoning that led the UHJ to that decision. Since we do not know which parts of the decision might be changed by a future UHJ, we cannot be sure about any principles that appear to be implied by the decision. What we can do is use it as a pointer to direct us to the Writings where we will find the principles, which cannot be changed.

Shoghi Effendi wrote:

"... the Guardian of the Faith has been made the Interpreter of the Word and that the Universal House of Justice has been invested with the function of legislating on matters not expressly revealed in the teachings. The interpretation of the Guardian, functioning within his own sphere, is as authoritative and binding as the enactments of the International House of Justice, whose exclusive right and prerogative is to pronounce upon and deliver the final judgment on such laws and ordinances as Bahá'u'lláh has not expressly revealed. Neither can, nor will ever, infringe upon the sacred and prescribed domain of the other. Neither will seek to curtail the specific and undoubted authority with which both have been divinely invested.

(*The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 149)

Don't let the future tense here dominate the reading, as if he was talking just about the future. Given that the UHJ did not exist at the time it was written, the "nor ever will" is inserted as a parenthetical comment, but I do not read this primarily as a prediction about the future. Shoghi Effendi is discussing the essential — timeless — relationship between the 2 institutions. His statement means that nothing the

Guardian writes may be read by us as Bahai law, and nothing the UHJ writes may be read by us as an interpretation of the scripture.

Shoghi Effendi's dictum here is broken every time a Bahai pulls out a letter from or on behalf of the Guardian and says — "that's what we must do, that's the law." And it is broken every time a Bahai reads a message or letter from the UHJ and says, "so that is the Bahai teachings, the UHJ says so." But although it is broken daily, all over the Bahai world, the Guardian's stricture remains. In reality, in truth, in fact, the Guardian has not made a law, and the UHJ has not authoritatively interpreted the teachings — even if all 9 members were to think they had ! Even if 99% of the world Bahai community thought they had. Even if every Bahai were to treat something the Guardian wrote as if it were law. The Guardian and the UHJ would still not have infringed on the domain of the other, because they CAN not do it. The Guardian has not legislated, because he CAN not legislate. The UHJ has not authoritatively interpreted the teachings, because it CAN not do so. That is why the "or ever will" is redundant: it is just a rhetorical underlining of the "Neither can."

This explanation of Shoghi Effendi, about the two spheres of legislation and interpretation, is itself an interpretation of the *Will and Testament*. So it is part of the Bahai Covenant.

In light of this, to turn to the writings of the UHJ for interpretations of Bahai scriptures is, in fact, neglect of the Covenant. (That is, presuming one knows about this aspect of the Covenant - those who do not know about are naturally excused: we all function within the limits of our own understanding).

To take something the House of Justice says and treat it as an interpretation of Bahai teachings is to say, in effect - "I know the Covenant makes this argument invalid, but I need to do it to reinforce my argument, so what the heck." As if the Covenant could be switched off for a moment while we deal with a particular point. And this is my problem with Susan Maneck's critique of my "Theology of the State" article. She knows very well that an appeal to the writings of the UHJ is not valid, within the framework of Bahai theology, but she does it anyway.

But that is perhaps an over-simplification. When writing Bahai theology, the Covenant is the basic framework. But someone doing a historical or sociological study of the Bahai Faith must *not* take the Covenant and its provisions as an *a priori* revealed truth. In history and science, there are no revealed truths. So someone doing a sociological study of the Bahai community can take statements by Bahais and by the UHJ and write about them as "the Bahai teachings". In fact, for an academic researcher to ignore or critique what is believed in the community, and instead go back to the Writings and say, "this is the real Bahai Faith" would be a really suspect method. At most a scientist can say what Baha'u'llah taught, and what Bahais are teaching, but the scientific method does not give any authority to say what is the "real" teachings. Whereas the Covenant does - it actually requires us to say that what Baha'u'llah taught, and Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi explained, is the real Teachings and anything else is at best a pointer to them (that "anything else" includes my work, by the way: at best it will point readers towards the Writings).

Susan Maneck works both as a secular scientist, in the study of religion and history at a college, and as a Bahai theologian, teaching a course in Bahai theology at the Wilmette Institute. In the secular field, the Covenant is just one item of data, whereas in Bahai theology it is the basic framework for doing theology at all, it is as much a “given” as ‘the existence of the earth’ is a given for doing geology. So perhaps when she (selectively) uses statements from the UHJ as if the UHJ had somehow stepped into the Guardian’s shoes, she is not so much neglecting the Covenant as slipping from one field of study into another, applying secular norms in a religious discourse. It is difficult to wear two different hats, when there is an important contradiction between them.

I have made it very easy for myself, in *Church and State*, by saying at the outset that I will write as a theologian and not as an “academic scholar of the science of religion” — I’ve subordinated secular methodology to theological method. For example, I don’t argue whether a particular interpretation by Shoghi Effendi, or Abdu’l-Baha, stands up to scrutiny, I take it as a given that these are authoritative interpretations: they are the Bahai Teachings. Theology begins after that, in trying to understand what they mean. And I don’t treat anything that is not an authoritative interpretation as a *de facto* equivalent, however many people may have said it. There is no room in the Covenant for using either the consensus of the believers, or the writings of the UHJ or its members or the Hands or other revered figures, as indications of what the Bahai teachings are.

I observe that distinction strictly - it is my *scriptura sola*. If I was trying to ride both the secular and the theological horse at the same, I couldn’t do that. I was fortunate in having a supervisor, for my dissertation, who would allow me to write purely from a faith-based point of view, so long as I said clearly that that was what I was doing. And of course, providing the evidence and the arguments were sound. “Doing theology” is not an excuse for presenting personal opinions as facts: it just means that the evidence and arguments have to be from scripture, and not from the practice of the religious community.

- Sen

31 May:

[in relation to the Bahai theologian thing] XX wrote:

"I read this as stating that you are writing as a representative of the community to the rest of the World. I can't put my finger on it, but something about it, between the lines,..."

No way.

I say explicitly that the book *Church and State* is just my own understandings, that it is not an authoritative view of the Bahai teachings, and I warn the (non-Bahai) reader

that it is mainly written for the Bahai community.

That's normal for theology: in the same way, Christian theology is written mainly for Christians. Since I am interested in theologies, I do read Christian theology, and also Islamic and Jewish theology, but I do not expect those authors to accommodate to readers like me. Vice versa, when writing Bahai theology it has to be written mainly for the Bahais to read. Theology is "faith seeking understanding:" Being committed to Bahai beliefs, we then have certain curiosities and questions. Historian or sociologists of religion, and people of other Faiths, looking at the Bahai Faith will also have questions, but they will be different, and they need a different kind of book. One tip for writing a readable book is to remember why you are writing and who you are writing for.

As for addressing the world: here and there in the book I suggest gently that some other Faiths might learn something from looking at Bahai theology (eg last two sentences of the Introduction). But I wouldn't have the gall to tell them that I have the answers to their problems. The answers to Christian problems have to come mainly from Christian resources, the answers to Islam's problems will come from an Islamic reformation, based on Islamic sources.

YY wrote:

"The gist of this seems to be that to reject the authority of the UHJ is to reject the authority of Bahá'u'lláh: its pronouncements are taken (or are supposed to be taken) as authoritative by Bahá'ís."

I agree, [that the decisions of the UHJ are to be taken as authoritative by Bahá'ís] but I don't think that is all that is required of us.

- Q: Why do we accept the authority of the UHJ?

- A: Because it is part of the Covenant.

- Q: What is the Covenant? What does it tell us? What does it ask of us?

Just as the first verse of the Aqdas says that obedience is of no value without "recognition" ('irfan, mystic "knowing"), obedience to the UHJ should be seen as one element of understanding and responding to the Covenant, and not as a Readers-Digest substitute for it.

Religious communities always walk the line, between minimising and exaggerating their own beliefs. The history of religion shows us that the exaggerators have done as much harm to their religions as the minimisers. In *The Dispensation of Baha'u'llah*, Shoghi Effendi sets out the "fundamental verities" and "root principles", on "certain truths which lie at the basis of our Faith and the integrity of which it is our first duty to safeguard." (p88) When we look at his method, we can see that "integrity" involves drawing positive and negative boundaries around each doctrine, as well as explaining

its contents. For each of the verities, he says what we cannot and should not say, as well as what we must say. The affirmations and the negations are equally important in defining the teaching.

For example: from page 88 to 101 (in *World Order of Baha'u'llah*: the various editions have different page numbers), Shoghi Effendi cites passages that show how exalted the revelation and person of Baha'u'llah is, and then he adds "a word of warning" and says what Baha'u'llah is not: not God in God's essence, or the incarnation of God:

"That Baha'u'llah should, notwithstanding the overwhelming intensity of His Revelation, be regarded as essentially one of these Manifestations of God, never to be identified with that invisible Reality, the Essence of Divinity itself, is one of the major beliefs of our Faith - a belief which should never be obscured and the *integrity* of which no one of its followers should allow to be compromised."

Great as the revelation of Baha'u'llah may be, it does not aim to "overthrow of the spiritual foundation of the world's religious systems" but rather "assist in the realization of their highest aspirations." It is not the "final revelation" (p 104).

When he moves on to discuss the Bab, he both asserts the Bab's station and says that he is "not to be regarded merely as an inspired Precursor of the Baha'i Revelation."

When he considers 'Abdu'l-Baha, he says both that he "towers above" the destinies of the Faith and all its subsequent ministers, and that he "is not a Manifestation of God" (121) but then hastens to add that "we should not by any means infer that Abdu'l-Baha is merely one of the servants of the Blessed Beauty, or at best one whose function is to be confined to that of an authorized interpreter of His Father's teachings."

After a long section explaining how exalted the Master's station is, Shoghi Effendi reiterates (pp 125-6) that he is nevertheless not the equal of his Father. And he explains why theological exaggeration is such a problem: the exaggerators are "furnishing the enemy with proofs for his false accusations and misleading statements."

One of Shoghi Effendi's targets here is the first edition of *Baha'u'llah and the New Era*, p68, which says that "In this tablet the mystic Unity between Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha is strikingly affirmed in the words "He is Myself."" Shoghi Effendi responds, in *The Dispensation of Baha'u'llah*, "to maintain that the assertion "He is Myself," ... establishes the identity of Baha'u'llah with Abdu'l-Baha, ... would also amount to a reversion to those irrational and superstitious beliefs which have insensibly crept, in the first century of the Christian era, into the teachings of Jesus

Christ," 'Abdu'l-Baha's "words are not equal in rank" to those of Baha'u'llah, he asserts.

There is a natural process, in every religious tradition, that favours the exaggeration of faith statements. It feels more pious to exaggerate, rather than under-state, the claims of the religion, and it also looks more pious, to your fellow-believers, if you exaggerate, or over-emphasise. That's another reason why exaggeration is a greater danger to a religion than minimisation: exaggeration provides immediate ammunition for enemies and scoffers, but it is also the greater danger in the long term because it has the tide with it. Each generation, wanting to be faithful and pious, will exaggerate a little more, or be more resolute in maintaining exaggerated claims ventured by the generation before. Before very long, the religion is suffering a sort of 'superstition creep.'

Preserving the integrity of the teachings involves resisting the pull towards exaggeration. Believers who try to insist on the exact tenets of the Faith, *and nothing more*, inevitably appear weak, suspect, half-hearted. That suspicion from one's fellow-believers is simply a price that has to be accepted, if the integrity of the teachings matters.

If Shoghi Effendi felt this way about a claim that Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha had a mystic unity, what do you think he would have felt about people calling UHJ messages "letters from God" -- a claim clearly denied in the Will and Testament, which emphasises that the UHJ's legislation (and how much more its general guidance) "form no part of the divine explicit text."

To return to the 'Dispensation of Baha'u'llah': when Shoghi Effendi comes to the station and function of the Administrative Order, and its two organs, the Guardianship and the House of Justice, we see the same pattern of argument. He is equally emphatic about what we *must* say, and what we *must not* say; he opposes both minimisation and exaggeration. The incomparable nature of the AO is asserted, and its indubitable scriptural foundations are contrasted to those of previous religious institutions. The Guardian and the UHJ "Each exercises, within the limitations imposed upon it, its powers, its authority, its rights and prerogatives."

It is not good enough to consider obedience to the Covenant as simply a response to the powers, authorities, rights and prerogatives of the Guardian and the UHJ. That leaves out "the limitations" - it leaves out the negative part of Shoghi Effendi's argument, and that omission is a step towards exaggeration.

Among these limitations is that:

"the Guardian of the Faith ... can never, even temporarily, assume the right of

exclusive legislation."

this half-answers XX's question about using "the Guardian's letters (and letters from his secretaries) as the basis for a lot of the Baha'i administration." To take anything the Guardian wrote, let alone something in his secretary's words, and treat it as Bahai law is to take the Affirmation half of the Covenant and leave out the Negation half - and that leads to exaggeration.

Having said that, the Guardian and the UHJ, successively, have been the head of the Bahai Faith and the head of its administrative apparatus: they have taken many pragmatic decisions below the level of either interpretation of the Writings or legislation, and there is no harm in applying such procedures uniformly wherever appropriate, and maintaining them until the Head of the Faith changes them. For instance, at various times Shoghi Effendi recommended different voting procedures for NSA elections, and the UHJ has since changed these again. In other cases we are still applying procedures that were established or endorsed by Shoghi Effendi. What we must not do is take these as a form of Bahai Law, or take the Guardian's pronouncements as "laying down independently the constitution [of the UHJ], or "encroach[ing] upon the liberty of [the international delegates] ... whose sacred right is to elect the body of his collaborators."

and among those limitations is that the Guardian, and not the UHJ, is "the Interpreter of the Word of God," and that the UHJ's "laws form no part of the divine explicit text."

ZZ wrote:

" [the UHJ's] pronouncements are taken (or are supposed to be taken) as authoritative by Bahá'ís. I imagine anyone who is perceived to be flagrantly disregarding this ... would likely be disenrolled."

Would I be being paranoid to read this as an insinuation that those who have been disenrolled must have been flagrantly disregarding the authority of the UHJ? Is this what we are intended to understand? If this is an implied accusation, it begs the questions: what are the specifics, and where is the evidence?

- Sen

1june:

XX said:

“I understand the Divine Banquet being set for all to benefit from; enrolled Baha’is are those who are allowed to work in the kitchen and serve at the table, closely obeying the head cook. Others can pick and choose at the table as they please.”

I think this is quite wrong. Is there somewhere a clause in the *Will and Testament* that says it only applies to enrolled Bahais? Of course not - in those days there was no enrollment. ‘Abdu’l-Baha was never on the rolls! Mirza Abu’l-Fadl was probably never on the rolls. Perhaps Shoghi Effendi was, in England, but perhaps not. Even today, in China and Iran and Saudi Arabia, etc., there is no enrollment. Does that mean that the Bahais in these countries are not bound by the *Will and Testament*?

I know of no basis for the idea that unenrollment is an ‘out’. The authority of the head of the Faith, the Guardian and the House of Justice does not turn on and off according to whether your name is on the rolls.

The Administration itself is a means not an end, so it is not the whole of the Faith but just an organ within it, it is one part of a Bahai life not the definition of what a Bahai life is. The membership rolls in turn are a means to an end within the administrative order. Where you have voting, and quorums, and majority decisions, you need first to have a list of names.

YY wrote:

“The advantage I see of Christianity, Hinduism or Buddhism, over the Baha’i Faith is that there are a diversity of understanding in how the religious writings are interpreted and implemented. If you are unhappy with what your denomination is doing or thinking, you can explore the other ones within your religion and still remain a believer and remain part of a community.”

The reason why you have to look to a different denomination in (Protestant) Christianity is that in the Protestant model of a church, the functions of administration, doctrine and liturgy are all embodied in one membership. A split on doctrine or administration leads to a split in the worshipping community, which is supposed to be the body of Christ. A difference about the right or preferred form of service leads to a split in administration, because “membership” is conceived as one thing - how could people who do not worship together be in the same church?

The dynamics in the Bahai community are completely different, because these three functions are separated in the House of Justice, Guardianship and House of Worship. That means that a difference about an administrative issue does not have to lead to a split in the communion, in the worshipping community. Compare that to the looming split in the Anglican communion (“communion” = worshipping together) over an administrative and doctrinal issue (the recognition of gay marriages).

Like any good modern building, the Bahai community is designed with fire-walls. And this is just as revolutionary and innovative in the “technology” of religious governance, as the formal separation of the executive, legislature and judiciary was in

the technology of civil governance.

This separation of the 3 organs means that people who do not worship together can be part of the same community. There's a tablet quoted by Ishraq Khavari in *Ganjinih-i-Huduud va Akhaam*, p. 232 which says it is OK to have multiple Mashriq'l-adhkars in one place. The question would have been asked because in Islam, in principle, there should be only one Friday mosque in each place — meaning that the central event in religious life had to include all, and be uniform for all. History has watered that principle down in Islam, but the idea is there. By allowing multiple Mashriqs, the Bahai teachings allow multiple forms of worship side-by-side, just as the various orders of Sufism live side by side. It is no accident that the Bahai house of worship is called the house for *dhikr* (the chanting of *dhikr* being a Sufi practice), and is not called a *jaami`* (mosque, = gathering).

Vice versa, because the Mashriq is the place of worship for all “religionists” — not just registered members of an administrative community — it is not necessary to achieve unity of administration or doctrine in order to worship together.

This loose web structure is much stronger than a monolithic church. It is a genuinely new structure for religious community, a new and more sophisticated way of thinking about the religious life in its various aspects. It is postmodern: it will not start working properly until it is populated by postmodern Bahais. The modern era produced people who almost automatically think in centralist, monolithic terms, who look for a single strong principle (usually ideological) and then think outward from that, extending the hegemony of whatever they have chosen as the core. So we get admino-centric Bahai thinking, religious fundamentalism in general, patriotism, communism, and ideological capitalism: all diseases of the centralising modern psyche.

YY has implied that I was disenrolled for my opinions, specifically in *Church and State*. From the above, it is clear that this could not be true: that would involve the UHJ making rulings on the interpretation of the Writings, which they are unable to do, and it would confuse the two kinds of membership, administrative and doctrine. In a letter to Daniella Pinna, the UHJ wrote “Concerns with Mr. McGlinn’s actions have nothing to do with his treatment of topics such as church and state.” So let’s consign that idea to the trash: I was not, and Bahais are not, disenrolled for their opinions.

In any case, the UHJ members had not had time to read the whole book before 14 November 2005, when they wrote their ‘Bahai theologian’ letter to the NSAs. It is quite possible that the book had not even arrived in Haifa by then, or was still in the “books to process” stack at the World Centre library. So it is impossible that I was excluded from the community because of the research that I report in the book: it was just for the statement on the first page, which someone had selectively quoted to the UHJ to make it appear that I was making a claim to status. Such a claim would be seen as an action, not as an opinion.

I imagine this selective quotation was probably sent from North America: my book was printed there and gift copies were sent to people such as the NSA and the

Bahai studies journals, who would have had copies before I had my own. I do not know, of course, how much of the book was actually quoted to the UHJ. It seems likely that it was not the whole sentence, and unlikely that it went as far as page 2, where I deny any claim to authority, or included the various sections of the Introduction which define terms such as “theology” and reflect on its limitations.

I also do not expect the UHJ members to read the book: I have written for the few who are sufficiently interested in the church-state relationship to deal with a mass of detail and the close reading of many texts. If these few read the book and understand it in the sense that was actually intended, I am content. If they respond, I will be delighted.

- Sen

June 2:

ZZ asked:

"Without giving the reason for his disenrolment, perhaps Sen would confirm to us that he has been informed of the reason himself."

No, the only information I have is from a letter which was not addressed to me, but to the NSAs of the world. The text is available at <http://bahairants.com/fahrenheit-145-77.html>

The only information I have had since then is negative. One person ran a campaign for some time attempting to prove I was disenrolled because I had not followed Bahai review - this was eventually squashed by a letter from the UHJ saying that this was not the basis for their decision. Other people have said that it was because of my opinions on the church-state issue, and that too has been squashed by the UHJ. The scuttlebutt among certain Persian Bahais is that I did something really nasty when I visited Iran a few years ago. If they can figure out what they think I did, and where, no doubt the UHJ will squash that too.

I gather your theory is that I have been politically involved. When you've worked out the details, I suggest you write to the ITC or UHJ asking if political involvement was the reason for Mr. McGlinn's disenrollment. From past examples, I think they will be happy to say it was not.

I do not support calls for due process and transparency in relation to enrollment and disenrollment, for several reasons:

- It would lead to heresy trials, which are more harmful than the ill they are supposed to correct,
- It would confuse disenrollment with the removal of voting rights. When someone does something wrong, the ultimate sanction is the removal of rights, and there is a

procedure and counselling and consultation, and they know what they have to do to get their voting rights back. None of this applies to disenrollment.

- It would give too much weight to disenrollment. If there were formal reasons given for a disenrollment, and the person had a chance to hear them and refute them before the decision was taken, the Bahais in the community would have every reason to think that those who eventually were disenrolled had really done something very wrong. As it is, disenrollment is more like deciding not to extend the term of a Counsellor - no reasons are given, and the sensible thing for observers is to be agnostic, not to invent reasons.

For me, and I think for Bahais generally, the interesting question is not what was the reason, but what is the purpose, in disenrolling certain people?

- What vision of the future Bahai community lies behind this?
- What is the function of membership rolls in it?
- How are the unenrolled Bahais expected to contribute to it?
- How does the existence of two different kinds of Bahais affect relationships in the community, and between the community and the world?

[The following was also posted on June 2 to on Rants but does not appear on the site : nor does the posting I replied to, which referred to my purpose in writing theology, “to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahai community, to enable Bahais to understand their relatively new faith and to see what it can offer the world.”)]

Dear XX:

this was not a mistake, but you have to read the whole sentence to understand it. What the UHJ quoted was only half a sentence, and gives quite the wrong impression.

Either theology is one of those sciences which begin and end in words, or it serves a purpose. If theology does serve a purpose, then you need to know what its proper purpose is: the purpose gives you a standard to say whether a particular theology is a good one or not. For instance, if the purpose of medicine is to improve the quality of human life, then a medical discovery that serves only to make the discoverer rich and famous is not good medicine - even if it meets every clinical standard and is duly footnoted and refereed etc.

Now, here's what I really wrote in Church and State pages 1 and 2:

This book presents my own understanding of the Bahai teachings on some issues that are now critically important to the Bahai community and its relations with the world. ...

I should declare at the outset that my stance is not that of a historian or academic scholar of the science of religion, but of a Bahai theologian, writing from and for a religious community, and I speak as if the reader shares the concerns of that community. As a Bahai theologian, I seek to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahai community, to enable Bahais to understand their relatively new faith and to see what it can offer the world. The approach is not value-free. I would be delighted if the Bahai Faith proved to have a synergy with post-modernity, if it prospered in the coming decades and had an influence on the world. ...

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.

... The present volume has been self-published as part of the requirements for a Master's degree, and would in several respects be different if it was a more formal and market-oriented publication.

So what I am saying is that this is a faith-based, value-orientated approach: it is theology, not the objective study of religion. That does not mean that the standards of proof are any lower.

For comparison: a biologist who studies ecologies and extinction mechanisms could observe the decline and extinction of a species objectively, taking care not to interfere with the process he is studying. It would be a successful study if it yielded understanding. An ecological activist could study the same species — using exactly the same techniques, the same standards of proof — but with the purpose of saving the species. He will be delighted if the species survives: that is a value, which is not consistent with an objective, value-free approach.

In the same way, I have a commitment and moral purpose in my study and, especially when writing in a university setting, the reader has a right to know what it is. That exonerates me, and my supervisor, from the accusation that we are doing theology but presenting it as the objective study of religion; it provides a standard for evaluation, and it identifies possible biases. I might for instance be overly optimistic about the future of the Bahai Faith in a postmodern society, simply because I want it to be a success.

In *Church and State* I defined my purposes as “to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahai community, to enable Bahais to understand their relatively new faith and to see what it can offer the world.” The list is not exhaustive, but I am not persuaded that it is wrong.

Theology is **critical**, in the sense of testing its assumptions and looking for real weaknesses, but also in the sense of seeking to enhance appreciation. Literary criticism for example is not primarily devoted to denouncing bad writing, its positive role is to help us to appreciate good writing.

Clarification follows from the systematic and critical method of theology,

which exposes vague expressions used without thought about their meaning, and uncovers muddles. For instance, Bahai discourse — and my own thinking up to a certain point — have generally confused the issues of Shoghi Effendi's not appointing a successor to the Guardianship, as required by Abdu'l-Baha's *Will and Testament*, and the Guardian apparently not writing a Will as required by the *Kitab-e Aqdas*. The observation that these are two separate issues, because the terms of Abdu'l-Baha's *Will and Testament* do not allow the appointment to be made in the Guardian's own Will, clarifies both issues, by distinguishing things that had been confused. Similarly, *Church and State* addressed the Baha'i teachings concerning the House of Justice and the International Tribunal, which had been conflated in footnotes to the earliest translations of *Some Answered Questions* and in some influential early Baha'i books. As soon as it is noticed that two separate things are being discussed, the texts themselves become largely self-explanatory, because the apparent contradictions were due to approaching the texts with a confusion of concepts.

Purification is an aspect of theology's self-critical method: as we study the Bahai texts in a systematic way, it becomes evident that some of what we thought were 'Bahai teachings' are contaminations, resulting from the adoption by Bahais, in various generations, of assumptions accepted in their various societies and political environments. It is difficult to detect and escape the gravitational pull of our philosophical, religious and cultural backgrounds, but we can try to do so by returning to the source texts in a systematic way.

Finally, theology **strengthens** the ideas of the religious community, first by removing muddles, and then by locating the scriptural roots of the various teachings so distinguished. But more important is the role of any open discussion: whatever is discussed remains alive and lived, while what is merely taken for granted quickly becomes a dead letter. Thus a good theology is not necessarily one that brings about a change in ideas. A theology which takes what is known and 'makes it new' has also strengthened the ideas of the community.

For those who want to read the whole of the Foreword and Introduction to Church and State, I've put them up as a PDF at <http://www.sonjavank.com/sen/articles.htm>

It's the second on the list, click on the blue pdf button to start it

- Sen

3 June: [in response to the idea that Bahai theology is synonymous with Bahai scholarship]

My two bits, for what's its worth, is that theology is a field of study, and an approach to studying it. Not objectively, but with a commitment to the religion concerned.

Theology is not the same thing as “scholarship” or even Bahai scholarship, it is one small part of Bahai scholarship.

To say somebody is a scholar is to say they have a certain proficiency and expertise, or perhaps an academic job. I have never called myself a scholar, I am a student. I study, and write about, theology, ergo I am a theologian, just as someone like ZZ, a Bahai who teaches philosophy, calls himself a Bahai philosopher. That does not mean that he is a good philosopher, or that I am a good theologian. These words refer only to fields of study, not to any rank.

There are in fact a number of Bahais who write and teach Bahai theology: you can take a course in Bahai theology at the Wilmette institute, and there’s Jack MacLean, Julio Savi, Juan Cole, Udo Schaeffer, Hushmand Sabet and no doubt many more.

What Bahais call “deepening” is called “theology” at a university. If you do it with good evidence, critically, systematically, and in dialogue, it may even be accepted at the university as a legitimate field of study (and more important, it may actually contribute to the Faith).

Ideally, theology has nothing to do with an ecclesiastical hierarchy. As I have said in an earlier comment, theology and power have to be kept separate. It is not theology that has harmed religious communities in the past, but the endorsement or enforcement or condemnation of one particular theology, by those in power. In the Bahai Faith, learning and expertise are not required for membership of the elected or appointed bodies, and the administrative and doctrinal functions in the community are separated, so *especially* in the Bahai community there should be no excuse for confusing the study of theology with ecclesiastical prerogatives. There are simply no ecclesiastical prerogatives to be had.

- Sen

4 June:

"Have you talked to the professor of theology in Belgium Farhan referred to? [...]"

Yes, I’ve met him, and I have some of his work. He has had a series of articles in the *Acta Orientalia Belgica*, from 1994 to 2006 (that I am aware of). He’s not a professor, nor does he have a PhD so far as I know.

There is no shortage of Baha’i theologians to talk to, but it is a small enough group working in European languages for us to at least know about one another’s interests and publications.

In *Beyond the Clash of Religions*, Schaeffer, sets out to present a “new theological paradigm” which is “the pivot of a new theology”, and on a footnote on page 12 he explains what he means by the term:

The term “Baha’i theology” is used for a methodical, systematic reflection on the Baha’i revelation (scentia fidiea) comprising God who manifests himself, the Manifestation (ie the prophetology), the Covenant, the image of man (the Bahai anthrology, Bahai ethics, Bahai political thought, social principles etc ... I refer to Robert Parry’s ‘Philosophical theology in Bahai Scholarship’ in *Bahai Studies Bulletin* October 1992, and to Jack McLean’s highly instructive contribution ‘Prolegomena to a Bahai Thology’ in JBS 5 1 March-June 1992, in which he has defined the concept of Bahai theology more closely and argued for its validity as a discipline.

Jack McLean’s ‘Prolegomena to a Bahai Theology’ in JBS 5:1 March-June 1992, says :

Theology is intrinsic to the Baha’i revelation. While community attitudes have tended to view the discipline of theology somewhat suspiciously, the term and field of “Baha’i theology” remain valid and are indispensable. ... Baha’i theology is, moreover, based in faith rooted in the person of Baha’u’llah and his divine revelation, has a strong metaphysical bias, eschews dogmatism, and welcomes diversity.

Jack McLean, in *Revisioning the Sacred: New Perspectives on a Baha’i Theology*, (page xi) says:

“Bahá’í Faith cannot come to be recognized as a distinct and independent world religion without a distinctive theology.”

On the other hand, I have a letter from a member of the UHJ who says that the Bahai Faith has no theology and doesn’t need it. And there are several negative mentions of theology in *One Common Faith*. In other words, there’s a gap in perceptions, between people who do the study, and people who are looking distrustfully at other people doing the study. Psychiatry and economics suffer from the same phenomenon. Nobody who wants friends and influence should enter such a field.

...

Later on June 4, I was asked:

"Would it be fair to say you approached this subject in a PURELY academic

fashion? [...]"

No. The book meets academic standards in terms of evidence, argument and sources, but my approach is not that of an academic scholar of the science of religion, but of a Bahai theologian, writing from and for a religious community, and I write as if the reader shares the concerns of that community.

A strictly academic approach would write from outside the Faith community, and the writing would be for the community of scholars-of-religion to read. The goal of academic writing would be simply to understand the phenomenon better, not to benefit it or harm it. Like the biologist studying extinction, just to understand the process.

My approach is intended to help the community, like an environmental activist who studies a species in order to help it. I set out to criticize, clarify, purify and strengthen the ideas of the Bahai community, to enable Bahais to understand their relatively new faith and to see what it can offer the world. The approach is not value-free. I would be delighted if the Bahai Faith proved to have a synergy with post-modernity, if it prospered in the coming decades and had an influence on the world. Because my approach is intended to help, and not just study, the community, a reader who is used to academic studies of religion that avoid such value judgements will have to make the necessary adjustments here and there.

I'm sure I've said this all before ...