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Postings on the Bahai Covenant, and the roles, powers and limitations of each of its institutions

A posting on Bahai_Community, where someone who had just encountered the Bahai Faith whether the Universal House of Justice can fill the role of the Guardian, 29 November 2006.

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From: Sen McGlinn
To: Bahai_Community@yahoogroups.com
Subject: I don't know IF you want me on this group???
Date sent: Wed, 29 Nov 2006 21:13:54 +0100

XX asked:

> does the UHJ fill the role of The
> Guardian, or is that role forever disappeared until the next
> Manifestation? Can we find things in the writing to uphold either
> viewpoint?

There is a lot in the Writings of Shoghi Effendi about this, but some of it may be difficult to read. My short summary is: they are like the heart and the lungs. Neither can replace the other, each needs the other to do its own work. I will quote two pieces written by the Guardian, and try to simplify and explain.

The first text is from a letter called "The World Order of Baha'u'llah" written in 1929. It must be remembered that the House of Justice was already known to the believers at that time, but the Guardianship was new, and its purpose had to be explained to them:

It must also be clearly understood by every believer that the institution of Guardianship does not under any circumstances abrogate, or even in the slightest degree detract from, the powers granted to the Universal House of Justice by Baha'u'llah in the Kitab-i-Aqdas, and repeatedly and solemnly confirmed by Abdu'l-Baha in His Will. It does not constitute in any manner a contradiction to the Will and Writings of Baha'u'llah, nor does it nullify any of His revealed instructions. It enhances the prestige of that exalted assembly, stabilizes its supreme position, safeguards its unity, assures the continuity of its labors, without presuming in the slightest to infringe upon the inviolability of its clearly-defined sphere of jurisdiction.

Starting from the end and working backwards, this says that the

Guardian and the Universal House of Justice each have their own "sphere of jurisdiction" - they each have their own job to do, and the authority to do it. The Guardianship complements the Universal House of Justice (my words), by adding to the prestige of the House, by making the supremacy of the House secure, by ensuring that the House remains united, and by helping it to continue to work and learn over time (because the Guardian stays the Guardian, while the members of the House come and go). The creation of the Guardianship does not contradict the Will (Kitab-e `Ahd) or other writings of Baha'u'llah, which establish the institutions of the House of Justice. In fact the Will and Testament of Abdu'l-baha (which created the Guardianship) has repeatedly confirms the powers granted to the Universal House of Justice.

The next explanation from the Guardian is much longer, and from 5 years later, in a letter called "the Administrative Order" written in 1934. He writes:

It should be stated, at the very outset, in clear and unambiguous language, that these twin institutions of the Administrative Order of Baha'u'llah should be regarded as divine in origin, essential in their functions and complementary in their aim and purpose.

(this is where I got the word 'complementary' from, when I explained the first passage)

Their common, their fundamental object is to insure the continuity of that divinely-appointed authority which flows from the Source of our Faith, to safeguard the unity of its followers and to maintain the integrity and flexibility of its teachings.

(the point seems to be that they have the same purposes, but different functions and powers to contribute to that purpose)

Acting in conjunction with each other these two inseparable institutions administer its affairs, coordinate its activities, promote its interests, execute its laws and defend its subsidiary institutions. Severally, ...

(They work together to achieve these purposes. But they each have their own functions and machinery (below) . "Severally" means each on its own.)

each operates within a clearly defined sphere of jurisdiction; each is equipped with its own attendant institutions - instruments designed for the effective discharge of its particular

responsibilities and duties.

(attendant institutions are helpers and assistants. These are like instruments or tools that the Guardianship and the House of Justice can use)

Each exercises, within the limitations imposed upon it, its powers, its authority, its rights and prerogatives. These are neither contradictory, nor detract in the slightest degree from the position which each of these institutions occupies.

(A prerogative is an exclusive right that an individual or group has: for instance, the English Queen or King has the prerogative of summoning parliament)

Far from being incompatible or mutually destructive, they supplement each other's authority and functions, and are permanently and fundamentally united in their aims.

(so the two institutions do not work against one another, as if one held the other in check (checks and balances). Rather they reinforce and complement one another)

Divorced from the institution of the Guardianship the World Order of Baha'u'llah would be mutilated and permanently deprived of that hereditary principle which, as Abdu'l-Baha has written, has been invariably upheld by the Law of God. "In all the Divine Dispensations," He states, in a Tablet addressed to a follower of the Faith in Persia, "the eldest son hath been given extraordinary distinctions. Even the station of prophethood hath been his birthright."

(If there was no Guardianship at all, the hereditary principle would not be expressed and endorsed in the World Order. It has been endorsed in principle [even though there are no living Guardians])

Without such an institution the integrity of the Faith would be imperiled, and the stability of the entire fabric would be gravely endangered.

(In fact when the Guardian died, there was an upheaval. If the Master had not appointed Shoghi Effendi, the position when Abdu'l-Baha died would have been much worse, because there was no House of Justice either. "Fabric" here means the material structure that makes up a building, not the cloth we make clothes from)

Its prestige would suffer, the means required to enable it to take a long, an uninterrupted view over a series of generations would be completely lacking,

(the Guardian already referred to "continuity": a weakness of all institutions that are elected every few years is that they "forget" because the people with experience move on. The strength of the Guardianship is that one person stays as a constant factor, and if the Guardian had had a successor he could have trained his successor)

and the necessary guidance to define the sphere of the legislative action of its elected representatives would be totally withdrawn.

(The "elected representatives" here means the House of Justice, probably the Universal House of Justice. How does the House of Justice know when it is allowed to make a law? By asking the Guardian, who interprets the Writings and can say when there is already a law, and when a new law can be made.)

Severed from the no less essential institution of the Universal House of Justice this same System of the Will of Abdu'l-Baha would be paralyzed in its action and would be powerless to fill in those gaps which the Author of the Kitab-i-Aqdas has deliberately left in the body of His legislative and administrative ordinances.

("Severed" means cut off, or lacking. Because the Aqdas does not include all the laws needed, or all the procedures to carry out the laws and policies, someone must fill them in. But the Guardian was not allowed to make laws, so if there was no House of Justice, the system could do nothing.)

"He is the Interpreter of the Word of God," Abdu'l-Baha, referring to the functions of the Guardian of the Faith, asserts, using in His Will the very term which He Himself had chosen when refuting the argument of the Covenant-breakers who had challenged His right to interpret the utterances of Baha'u'llah. "After him," He adds, "will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendants." "The mighty stronghold," He further explains, "shall remain impregnable and safe through obedience to him who is the Guardian of the Cause of God." "It is incumbent upon the members of the House of Justice, upon all the Aghsan, the Afnan, the Hands of the Cause of God, to show their obedience, submissiveness and subordination unto the Guardian of the Cause of God."

(this section explains that the Guardian is the interpreter, and that the House of Justice must obey the Guardian.)

"It is incumbent upon the members of the House of Justice," Baha'u'llah, on the other hand, declares in the Eighth Leaf of the Exalted Paradise, "to take counsel together regarding those things which have not outwardly been revealed in the Book, and to enforce that which is agreeable to them. God will verily inspire them with whatsoever He willeth, and He verily is the Provider, the Omniscient." "Unto the Most Holy Book" (the Kitab-i-Aqdas), Abdu'l-Baha states in His Will, "every one must turn, and all that is not expressly recorded therein must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. That which this body, whether unanimously or by a majority doth carry, that is verily the truth and the purpose of God Himself. Whoso doth deviate therefrom is verily of them that love discord, hath shown forth malice, and turned away from the Lord of the Covenant."

(this section explains the role of the House of Justice, and says that everyone must obey the majority view of the House of Justice)

Not only does Abdu'l-Baha confirm in His Will Baha'u'llah's above-quoted statement, but invests this body with the additional right and power to abrogate, according to the exigencies of time, its own enactments, as well as those of a preceding House of Justice. "Inasmuch as the House of Justice," is His explicit statement in His Will, "hath power to enact laws that are not expressly recorded in the Book and bear upon daily transactions, so also it hath power to repeal the same... This it can do because these laws form no part of the divine explicit text."

(the Master allows the House of Justice to change laws (enactments) that have been made by the House of Justice previously)

Referring to both the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice we read these emphatic words: "The sacred and youthful Branch, the Guardian of the Cause of God, as well as the Universal House of Justice to be universally elected and established, are both under the care and protection of the Abha Beauty, under the shelter and unerring guidance of the Exalted One (the Bab) (may my life be offered up for them both). Whatsoever they decide is of God."

(Both institutions are guaranteed protection from Baha'u'llah and guidance from the Bab. Whatever they decide is God's will)

From these statements it is made indubitably clear

and evident that 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.

(This is clear without explanation, and it is the most important part of the answer to your question)

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 Baha'u'llah has not expressly revealed.

(So both have binding authority, and that does not reduce the authority of the other. This is because they have two different jobs: interpretation and making laws)

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.

(no comment: it's clear)

Though the Guardian of the Faith has been made the permanent head of so august a body he can never, even temporarily, assume the right of exclusive legislation.

('august' means eminent and praiseworthy. The Guardian is the head of the House of Justice. The Guardian cannot make laws, even temporarily, so what the Guardian says does not become Bahai law)

He cannot override the decision of the majority of his fellow-members, but is bound to insist upon a reconsideration by them of any enactment he conscientiously believes to conflict with the meaning and to depart from the spirit of Baha'u'llah's revealed utterances.

(if the Guardian thinks that a law made by the House of Justice conflicts with the meaning of the Bahai Scriptures, or is not in line with the spirit of the teachings, the Guardian can ask the House of Justice to reconsider, but he cannot overrule the decision the House has made.)

He interprets what has been specifically revealed, and cannot legislate except in his capacity as member of the

Universal House of Justice.

(as we saw, what the Guardian says does not become Bahai Law. But the Guardian, as a member of the House of Justice, takes part in its meetings when it is making laws)

He is debarred from laying down independently the constitution that must govern the organized activities of his fellow-members, and from exercising his influence in a manner that would encroach upon the liberty of those whose sacred right is to elect the body of his collaborators.

(the Guardian cannot determine the constitution of the House of Justice, and he cannot use his influence to limit the freedom of the delegates to the international convention that elects the Universal House of Justice.)

The text goes on for several more paragraphs, but I think the point is clear. The Guardian cannot fill the role of the House of Justice, and the House of Justice cannot fill the role of the Guardian