Rank and Station: Reflections on the Life of Bahíyyih Khánum

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Abstract

This paper sets out the distinctive characteristics of the designation of rank in the Bahá'í administrative structure, drawing upon the example of Bahíyyih Khánum, the highest-ranking woman in the Bahá'í Dispensation to illustrate its essential features. The concept of rank and its functions in society and religion as well as its implications for justice and social organization are reviewed briefly as a background against which to consider the Bahá'í perspective on rank and station, and to assess the significance of the approach adopted by Bahíyyih Khánum as a person of exalted rank.

Résumé

Le présent article explique les caractéristiques distinctives de la désignation de rang dans la structure administrative bahá'íe. Pour en illustrer les aspects essentiels, il s'inspire de l'exemple de Bahíyyih Khánum, qui occupe le rang le plus élevé parmi les femmes dans la dispensation bahá'íe. L'auteur passe brièvement en revue le concept de rang dans la société et la religion, ses fonctions, ainsi que ses implications pour la justice et l'organisation sociale. Sur cette toile de fond, il examine ensuite la perspective bahá'íe sur les distinctions de rang et il analyse l'importance de la ligne de conduite adoptée par Bahíyyih Khánum en tant que personne occupant un rang exalté.

Resumen

Esta disertación traza las características distintivas en lo que atañe a designación de rango en la estructura administrativa bahá'í, valiéndose del ejemplo de Bahíyyih Khánum, la mujer de rango más elevado en el período divino bahá'í, con el fin

de demostrar sus aspectos esenciales. El concepto de rango y sus funciones en la sociedad y la religión, a la par con sus implicaciones para con la justicia y la organización social, se reexaminan brevemente como fondo de consideración para la perspectiva bahá'í sobre rango y posición, y también para asesorar el significado del planteamiento adoptado por Bahíyyih Khánum como persona de rango enaltecido.

Introduction

The Bahá'í administrative structure shares with other forms of organization, religious and secular, the assignment of rank to certain positions within it. However, the Bahá'í concept of rank has distinctive characteristics which render it unique, and which are exemplified in the conduct of Bahíyyih Khánum, the highest-ranking woman in the Bahá'í Dispensation.

To provide an appropriate framework within which to view the Bahá'í perspective on this subject, it is necessary to carry out a brief review of the issue of rank in social organization generally and in the most well-known systems of religious organization in the world today, those of Christianity and Islam. This will serve to highlight the salient features of the Bahá'í perspective on rank, which are illuminated by a study of the life of Bahíyyih Khánum.

Rank and Social Organization

Political and social philosophers have long been concerned with the nature of society, with issues of justice and social stability, and with providing "an ordering vision of what the political system ought to be and what it might become", a vision that would shape "the creation of a rightly ordered society" (Wolin 33, 34). While conceptions of social order differ, there appears to be general recognition of the fact that the organization and perpetuation of a social group requires the differentiation of functions of relative importance to the society, which brings in its wake social stratification and the emergence of hierarchies and elites. It also increases the potential for the introduction of economic, social, and political inequalities

as a consequence of variations of rank in the society, and raises the possibility of social conflict.

Contemporary social scientists have a deep and continuing interest in understanding inequality and its roots, due in no small part to their assessment that "In no society are all people equal. All societies are stratified" (Marx and Engels, 145). Studies of social stratification have examined the causes of economic, social, and political inequalities, have raised questions about "the naturalness, permanence, and inevitability" of such inequity, and asked whether "they were good for any social purpose" (Tumin 1).

<small>Systems of Stratification</small>

Systems of social stratification, defined as "the arrangement of any social group or society into a hierarchy of positions that are unequal with regard to power, property, social evaluation, and/or psychic gratification" (Tumin 12, 16–17), are universal and have their origins in antiquity.

Archeological records attest to the presence of some form of social stratification even in the small nomadic groups that characterized the earliest days of humankind. No doubt, at that time, age and gender in conjunction with physical strength constituted the criteria of stratification. Over time, particular historical and social contexts have given rise to further systems of stratification or social inequality. These include the estate system, characteristic of the feudal period in Europe and Asia, in which the strata included the landed gentry or nobility, the clergy, and the landless serfs or peasant class. Another example is the caste system in India, under which social groups are rigidly categorized according to the standings sanctioned by the prevailing religious practice. Within these hierarchical systems, those of noble descent and those in the dominant class are accorded the highest rank and enjoy the greatest power and privilege. In contemporary times, the industrial revolution and other movements for social justice have contributed to the decline of such hierarchical systems and have given impetus to the emergence of social classes that are based more on individual achievement and the performance of specific functions valued by society. Nevertheless, Sorokin maintains that "The social standing of a family, its titles, reputation, wealth, its relatives, and so on, still play a very great part in a man's reputation independent of his personal qualities" (450).

FUNCTIONS OF SOCIAL POSITIONS AND RANK

Sociologists link the performance of certain basic functions within a society with social survival and well-being and with social order. They call attention to the importance of defining various social positions, such as father, mother, teacher, and employer, of differentiating between them and of assigning to each a distinctive role consisting of a set of specific rights and responsibilities. According to Tumin, "This process is indispensable to any society if it is to continue for more that a generation, for to continue, a number of basic tasks must be assigned in such a way as to insure their completion" (19).

The operation of any social group requires a high degree of division of labor, based on recognition that not everyone is capable of performing the same functions. It also requires the coordination of the actions of the members of the group to ensure that the vital functions are assigned and effectively carried out.

Given the complexity of modern industrial societies, a number of theorists point to the necessity of placing and motivating individuals in the social structure. They observe that certain positions are more functionally important to a society than others and require special skills for their performance, and that there are a limited number of individuals who either have the necessary skills to perform these functions or who can be trained into these skills. These theorists hold the view that the performance of certain social functions, specifically those involving social organization and control, should be accorded a higher value or status than others. They tend to employ two factors in determining the relative rank of different positions—Those positions that "(a) have the greatest importance for the society and (b) require the greatest training or talent" are to receive "the best reward, and hence have the highest rank" (Davis and Moore 157–58). Cognizant of the social inequality inherent in this form of incentive system, the functional theorists of stratification nevertheless propose that, "In order to ensure that the more competent members of society seek the more important positions and that they are willing to undergo long and arduous training, it is necessary for those positions to provide sufficient rewards in the form of wealth, status, honor, and power" (Davis and Moore 155). By this means societies ensure that the most qualified persons conscien-

tiously fill the most important positions. The assignment of rank is used as a means of providing motivation to capable individuals to submit to the necessary training and preparation.

The more complex the society, the greater is the need for a system of organization to coordinate the most efficient use of human resources and to create order. Such a system specifies the individual's duties and functions, assigns authority so that members know where to look for directions, and defines and validates the relative importance to the society of the range of functions performed by its members.

Social Authority

No social group is without some degree of authority, either moral or legal, as an integral component of the roles performed by the members of the group. It has particular relevance to the relationship between leaders and followers— to the kind of legitimacy claimed by the leader and the type of obedience demanded. In modern democracies authority tends to be associated with a particular office or function, and is most likely to have a clear legal basis and be sanctioned by law. In other settings authority may simply proceed from the dominant, charismatic personality in the group, from ready consensus, from willing cooperation aimed at achieving a particular objective, or from mere custom and tradition.[1]

Problems Associated with Rank

While social stratification contributes to social cohesion and the organization of society with its differentiation of functions and some form of division of labor, inequality is often regarded as a major source of continuing conflict in a society (Tumin 11). The very existence of elite groups of exalted rank may well inhibit or suppress innovation and the development of creativity. In order to preserve their privileged status, elites tend to function as a conservative influence within a society, supporting the status quo and acting as a barrier to the social mobility of others. In societies with a highly crystallized class system, the social structure is frozen; once individuals are assigned to a place, usually at birth, they are unable to advance, with considerations of personal interest and the ability to perform a particular task ignored.

In many instances rank is associated with a class of people who are accorded unwarranted privileges, and allowed to exercise power over others for their personal advantage. In extreme cases, they are permitted to use this power to violate the law without fear of restraint or punishment. Addiction to the rewards of privilege may give rise to the development of attitudes of arrogance and superiority toward those of lesser rank and to the insistence that those who are their status inferiors display deferential and compliant behavior towards them. If high rank is conferred through the electoral process, the occupant may well be tempted to resort to means such as lobbying, bribery or secret deals to ensure reelection and the maintenance of this rank. Furthermore, the detached, formal attitude adopted by some people of rank in the performance of their functions reinforces and increases the sense of social distance between themselves and those of lesser rank. Such an attitude may well have a crushing effect on the morale and motivation of the less privileged, which may manifest itself either in a state of helpless resignation or as a potential cause for conflict.

A number of contemporary theorists maintain that human history should be viewed as a struggle between the haves and the have-nots (Marx and Engels 145–46). The existence of privileged elites encourages hostility, suspicion and distrust among the various segments of a society. This lack of trust and the absence of a unified vision serve to promote discord, rather than social integration. Indeed, Fuller identifies "rankism," defined as the "abuse of the power inherent in rank," as the common denominator of all forms of discrimination (143). He equates the misuse of rank with an assault on human dignity, and views "a world of equal dignity as a stepping-stone to the more just, fair, and decent societies that political philosophers and theorists . . . have envisioned and delineated" (64–65, 153).

Before moving to a discussion of the role of rank in religion, it is useful to note that although most modern democracies boast of their greater inclusiveness, there is also recognition that "governance consists of skills inherently lacking in the vast majority of citizens." Hence the observation "a certain elitism is grafted on to democracy. Typically it is defended as meritocractic, but today's elitism is actually more the reflection of managerial, scientific, and technocratic values" (Wolin 598–99).

Rank in Religion

A consideration of the role of rank in religion provides an example of a particular kind of social stratification with a distinctive hierarchical ordering of social positions, which accords to the clerical classes certain rights and powers over the masses. According to Weber, it is the hierarchical office that confers legitimate authority upon the priest as a member of an organized community (Lindt 486). Indeed, the legitimacy of priestly and ecclesiastical authority has been, and continues to be, one of the major theological and practical issues in the history of religions.

To illustrate the significance of rank in religion, it is useful to examine, in brief, the manner in which the hierarchical system of social positions evolved in Christianity and Islam, and to consider the functions of the ecclesiastical orders that emerged as well as the problems associated with the discharge of these functions.

Emergence of Clergy in Christianity

During His lifetime, Christ assigned to the apostles certain responsibilities for proclaiming God's kingdom in word and deed, functions they continued to exercise after the resurrection. A consultative meeting of Peter and James, Paul and Barnabas and others, held in Jerusalem, for the purpose of reaching a decision on the question of whether one had to be a Jew in order to become a Christian, provides an interesting glimpse into the means by which pressing and contentious issues were resolved in the absence of a clearly defined successor to Christ. The New Testament offers two slightly discrepant accounts of this meeting. The first, in Acts 15:13, 19, implies that there was one decision-maker with whom others assented, while in Galatians 2:1–10, it appears that the decision was based on a consensus among those present. Some historians have suggested that this seminal situation prefigures "a tension between popes (exercising their primacy) and bishops (emphasizing collegiality and collaborative action)" that has recurred over the centuries (Bellitto 5–7).

While the apostles were alive their personal authority and the expectation of Christ's imminent return forestalled questions of church governance. However, as the apostles died and the church's membership expanded and diversified, the need became more acute for a system of organization with

well-defined authority and a means of resolving disputes about doctrine. By the mid-second century of the Christian Era, the three-tiered ministry of bishops, presbyters or priests, and deacons was well established and widely accepted. Typically, the bishop was the overseer, having full responsibility for the ministry of preaching the word and administering the sacraments of the church. The presbyter or priest, as a fellow minister, helped the bishop in performing the rights and sacraments of the church, while the deacons assisted the bishop with the administrative work and by working for the welfare of the community. Constantine's proclamation of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire in AD 313 gave further impetus to this process. It granted civic privileges to the clergy and encouraged the development of a clerical caste system, one consequence of which was to obscure the role of the minister, suggested in the Gospels, as servant, following the example of Christ.

As the church became institutionalized, the bishop emerged as a leading figure with responsibility for a geographical area extending beyond that of one local church. In time, the bishop of Rome, who is regarded by tradition as standing in direct line from St. Peter, came to be considered as the first among equals. The primacy of the Pope was widely acknowledged by the fifth century and was maintained in the West until the Reformation in the sixteenth century challenged the legitimacy of the authority of the Pope and the Roman Curia. The Protestants "turned away from papal authority to the authority of the Bible," challenged "ecclesiastical legalism," and attempted "to restore a more biblical pattern of church and ministry" (Paul 539).

DISTINCTIVE FUNCTIONS OF PRIESTHOOD

The term "priesthood" refers to the professional leadership of one or other of the recognized world religions that form part of the Adamic Cycle, although the discussion here is specialized largely to Christian priesthood. Until recent times, eligibility for the priesthood was typically restricted to males, with most of the world religions providing analogous but supporting roles for women as nuns, deacons, and assistants. These roles are explicitly subordinate to those assigned to men, a fact that is of particular concern to those who seek to promote women's equality.

The priesthood constitutes a social elite, occupying a rank which confers upon them superiority in rights, prestige, and virtue over the layperson. Its members are full-time functionaries of the religion who have undergone certain training prior to their ordination. This ordination elevates the priest to a rank above that of the congregation, conferring upon him the religious authority and power to undertake the functions associated with the priestly role. While Protestant ministers undergo a form of training, Protestant groups tend to eschew "the notion that priestly ordination should elevate any man above his fellow human beings or confer upon him any access to the divine that is denied others," believing instead that each member of the community is "his or her own priest, with direct access to God" (Oxtoby 529).

Although there are is a wide range of potential functions that vary according to religious denomination, the responsibilities associated with the role of the priest in the Christian tradition generally include preaching, administering the sacraments (e.g., baptism, penance, the Eucharist, and marriage), dispensing blessings and dispensations, overseeing and nurturing the congregation, and in some instances, acting as intermediary between the divine and the human community. Priests are also expected to lead an exemplary life, to be models of piety and chastity.

Throughout history the existence of the priestly profession and the manner in which its members execute their functions have given rise to conflict between the religious leaders and the laity. In the past, for example, one form of conflict between laymen and the clergy involved the laity's rebellion against the sacred privileges of the clerical elite. This manifested itself in expressions of concern about the inherent inequality and injustice of the system, concerns that were amplified by certain members of the clergy's public displays of arrogance, wealth, greed, and the arrogation of unwarranted privilege. Furthermore the laity has, on occasions, objected to the economic burden of church taxes and the corrupt methods by which certain clergymen gained their clerical appointments (Vallier 529).

It is evident from a study of Church history that moral laxity and worldliness among priests have been continuing causes of conflict not only between the clergy and the laity, but also within the ecclesiastical structure itself. For example, the Church Council convened in Vienne, France, at the

beginning of the fourteenth century "encouraged clerics to persevere in a holy life but complained they rushed through their prayers, left parts out, and gossiped as they prayed. Some arrived late for services and departed early, even bringing their hunting dogs and birds with them to church" (Bellitto 66). In more recent years concerns about the moral laxity of the priesthood has been focused on issues of sexuality, including the abuse of children and vulnerable adult parishioners.

Another potential source of conflict played out in contemporary times arises from the dramatic rise in the educational level of the laity, which deprives the religious leader of his unique position as a man of learning. Further, the movement towards greater participation of the lay membership in all aspects of the life of the religious community, given impetus by the second Vatican Council, is perceived by some as a threat to the Roman Catholic clergy's power and prestige.

Emergence of Religious Leadership in Islam

The death of the Prophet Muhammad in AD 632 left Islam without a clearly designated head, one who would provide cohesive leadership to the Muslim community and extend the task inaugurated by the Prophet of spreading the message throughout the world. In this emergency situation, the inner circle of the Prophet's followers chose one of their own number, Abú Bakr, who was among the earliest and most respected believers, despite the conviction of those who had accompanied Muhammad on his last pilgrimage to Mecca that His son-in-law 'Alí had been designated as successor in authority. From this "act of improvisation came the great institution of the caliphate—the supreme sovereign office of the Islamic world" (Lewis, *The Middle East* 54), and, before long, it split Islam into two antagonistic sects, the majority Sunni and the minority Shi'ah, centered around allegiance to an elected caliph or to an appointed imam.

In the formative years of the Caliphate, the early Muslims continued to be preoccupied with questions concerning the legitimacy, authority, and powers of the caliph. Who should be chosen as leader? How was he to be chosen, by election, as the Sunnis maintained, or because of family connection, as the Shi'ahs believed? What are the extent and limits of his power? Can he be deposed? Who is to succeed him? In little more than a quarter

of a century after the death of the Prophet, "his community was riven by fierce dissensions, and his state foundered amid rebellion and civil war" (Lewis, *The Middle East* 62).

As ideally conceived, there was to be no priesthood and no laity in Islam, but this remains true only in a "theological sense" in that there is "no ordination in Islam, no priestly office, no sacraments which only an ordained priest can perform." In principle, "anyone with the necessary knowledge can lead in prayer, preach in the mosque, or officiate at weddings and funerals," with "those who devote their lives to pious pursuits" expected to earn their livelihood "through an honorable occupation such as handicraft or commerce" (Lewis, *The Middle East* 187). However, the realities are somewhat different, and, in time, the 'ulamá lost their "amateur status."

The growing complexity of Islamic law and the increasing corpus of religious literature, created the need for full-time religious experts, scholars and jurists, to study and administer the law and adjudicate legal issues. This led, in turn, to the emergence of a hierarchical class of professional men of religion, which, in a "sociological sense" might be regarded as a type of clergy (Lewis, Crisis of Islam 8). These clerical figures undertook a course of training, were recognized for their learning, accredited, and received some form of official certification authorizing them to provide spiritual guidance to the mass of the people, to adjudicate a wide range of matters in relation to marriage, divorce and inheritance, and to define and enforce religious orthodoxy. Shoghi Effendi provides a detailed and illuminating description of some of the elements and functions of the vast "sacerdotal hierarchy" that emerged, with the passage of time, in Shi'ah Islam.[2]

Rank in a Bahá'í Society

The Bahá'í writings do not convey a detailed description of the form of society anticipated for the future. Nevertheless, there is clear evidence that the Bahá'í Faith recognizes the potential benefits that accrue to a society from the existence of ranks within it. Indeed, the Universal House of Justice has clarified that "the proper functioning of human society requires the preservation of ranks and classes within its membership" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages*, par. 206.3). Additional details concerning the

role of rank are provided in such works as *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, where 'Abdu'l-Bahá sets out the principal ranks in society, assigning a high position to wise and skilful statesmen, people of learning, and those engaged in the endeavor to improve society and to increase the comfort of the citizens.

While acknowledging the legitimacy of rank and maintaining its social advantages, the Bahá'í teachings also contain specific provisions that address the issue of inequality and help to resolve some of the major problems and abuses traditionally associated with rank in society and religion. The organic development of a Bahá'í society in decades and centuries to come will incorporate these provisions to give rise to a social system which draws on the best features of rank while avoiding its negative aspects.

At this very early stage in that developmental process it is possible only to draw attention to some distinctive elements of the Bahá'í teachings that bear upon this theme. The statements of Bahá'u'lláh concerning respect and reward for accomplishment, including: "The people of Bahá should not deny any soul the reward due to him, should treat craftsmen with deference," and, "Great indeed is the claim of scientists and craftsmen on the peoples of the world," would, when taken in conjunction with His statements "concerning arts, crafts and sciences. Knowledge is as wings to man's life, and a ladder for his ascent. Its acquisition is incumbent upon everyone" (*Tablets* 38, 52, 51), imply the creation of a Bahá'í society in which the aspiration to proficiency and expertise forms an integral element of its ethic, reinforced by respect for the rank of those who have achieved eminence and a social mobility which does not impose unwarranted barriers on those seeking an appropriate recognition and reward for their skills.

In light of the historical record that those occupying a high rank have, in many instances, proven to be a conservative influence on innovation and change, it is significant to note that the future Bahá'í society will incorporate change into the essence of its being, in line with its aims to create an ever-advancing civilization and the statement of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that "the times never remain the same, for change is a necessary quality and an essential attribute of this world, and of time and place" (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Messages*, par. 35.7a).

Those of rank in that future society will also find it necessary to heed Bahá'u'lláh's admonition concerning their accomplishments: "In the estimation of the people of Bahá man's glory lieth in his knowledge, his upright conduct, his praiseworthy character, his wisdom, and not in his nationality or rank. O people of the earth! Appreciate the value of this heavenly word. Indeed it may be likened unto a ship for the ocean of knowledge and a shining luminary for the realm of perception" (*Tablets* 68).

RANK IN THE BAHÁ'Í ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER

A number of unique and innovative provisions govern the organization of the Bahá'í community. Of particular significance is the fact that the Bahá'í Faith is a lay religion, devoid of a clerical class. Within the Bahá'í community there are no figures comparable to the rabbis, priests, ministers or mullahs who exercise individual authority over the mass of the faithful and enjoy unwarranted rights and privileges not accorded to their fellow believers. With the rigid hierarchical distinction between clergy and layman removed, each believer is expected to accept personal responsibility for his or her spiritual progress rather than depending on the instructions and ministrations of the priest.

Underlining the uniqueness of this provision in the Bahá'í administrative order, Shoghi Effendi refers to "The abolition of professional priesthood with its accompanying sacraments of baptism, of communion and of confession of sins, the laws requiring the election by universal suffrage of all local, national, and international Houses of Justice, the total absence of episcopal authority with its attendant privileges, corruptions and bureaucratic tendencies," and he indicates that such provisions constitute "evidences of the non-autocratic character of the Bahá'í administrative order and of its inclination to democratic methods in the administration of its affairs" (*World Order* 153–54).

Although the Bahá'í Faith has no professional priesthood and no ordained clerical class, it does assign responsibility for administrative actions to certain individuals. The affairs of the community are administered by a system of democratically elected Spiritual Assemblies, operating under the guidance of the international governing body, the Universal House of

Justice, and assisted by individuals who are appointed to provide a counseling and educational function. The believers who serve in these capacities, however, do not have episcopal authority over the other members of the community, nor do they constitute an inherently superior and privileged class.

Bahá'í Conception of Rank

Two forms of rank exist within the Bahá'í community. The first is of a hereditary nature and pertains to the family of Bahá'u'lláh. The second involves the appointment or election of individuals to perform specific functions required for the administration of the community.

Our attention is directed first to the distinctive features of the rank associated with the members of Bahá'u'lláh's family, even though discussion of them is essentially only of academic interest at this time when the effects of ambition and jealousy have resulted in no descendants being found within the Bahá'í community.

Bahá'u'lláh states in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas that "God hath bidden you to show forth kindliness towards My kindred" (par. 61). Referring to His male descendants, the Aghsán, He states, "It is enjoined upon everyone to manifest love towards the Aghsán," and, "It is incumbent upon everyone to show courtesy to, and have regard for the Aghsán, that thereby the Cause of God may be glorified and His Word exalted" (*Tablets* 222). However, the privileges associated with this hereditary rank have clear limitations, of far-reaching consequences, thus removing the potential for injustice and oppression. Referring to His "kindred" Bahá'u'lláh clearly specifies in the Aqdas that "He hath granted them no right to the property of others" (par. 61). In relation to His sons, Bahá'u'lláh reiterates, in the Book of His Covenant, that "God hath not granted them any right to the property of others." He makes it clear that the rank to which they have been summoned carries with it heavy responsibilities, such that this rank can be forfeited by failure to exercise the functions and duties associated with it. Hence His counsel: "We exhort you to fear God, to perform praiseworthy deeds and to do that which is meet and seemly and serveth to exalt your station" (*Tablets* 222). Shoghi Effendi in a letter written on his behalf provides the following elaboration of this theme: "The higher the station of those who

have the privilege of being related by ties of blood to the Centre of the Cause the greater indeed must be their responsibility to serve, and thus prove in deeds their worthiness to occupy such an exalted and responsible position" (Khan 273).

The second kind of rank found in the Bahá'í Faith pertains to positions within the Bahá'í administrative system that an individual is called upon to assume through election or appointment. Implicit in this form of rank is the performance of a particular function, recognized as important by the Head of the Faith. Functionality is intimately associated with the Bahá'í concept of rank. For example, the Hands of the Cause, who were assigned advisory and protective functions, of importance to the development of the Faith, are described as being of an "exalted rank" (Shoghi Effendi, *Messages* 127), such that they were entitled to be kept informed of Bahá'í community development, and their advice to be received and considered carefully by the Spiritual Assemblies. Likewise, the Universal House of Justice, follow-ing the appointment of Continental Counselors, clarified that "the Boards of Counselors outrank the National Institutions of the Faith." Here again, the element of functionality is paramount, with the House of Justice af-firming that the Board of Counselors "has the necessary rank to enable it to ensure that it is kept properly informed and that the Spiritual Assem-blies give due consideration to its advice and recommendations." However, it also cautions that "the essence of the relationships between Bahá'í insti-tutions is loving consultation and a common desire to serve the Cause of God rather that a matter of rank or station" (Universal House of Justice, *Messages*, par. 206.2).

The members of the Continental Board of Counselors function under the guidance of an International Teaching Centre, the members of which are appointed by the Universal House of Justice. These Boards supervise individuals designated as Auxiliary Board members, and who are them-selves helped by assistants.

With the growth of this institution, the members of which have a spe-cific designation and a rank distinct from the mass of the community and function as individuals, one might well enquire whether it represents the beginning of a priesthood arising unobtrusively, as occurred in the early years of Christianity and Islam. Such a question is given a definitive re-

sponse by the Universal House of Justice in a message about this aspect of the Bahá'í administrative order, with the statement "The existence of institutions of such exalted rank, comprising individuals who play such a vital role, who yet have no legislative, administrative or judicial authority, and are entirely devoid of priestly functions or the right to make authoritative interpretations, is a feature of Bahá'í administration unparalleled in the religions of the past" (*Messages*, par. 111.14).

The role of ensuring, in the long term, that people of rank do not overstep the authority associated with their prescribed functions, is assigned to the Universal House of Justice in its constitution. Among the powers and duties with which the House of Justice has been invested is the responsibility "for ensuring that no body or institution within the Cause abuse its privileges or decline in the exercise of its rights and prerogatives" (5). Thus the Universal House of Justice stands as the guarantee that the future expansion of the Bahá'í administrative system will remain within the guiding principles laid down in the authoritative Bahá'í texts.

Relationship between Rank and Spiritual Station

In contrast to the view of rank current in the world at large, where a high rank and an important social position connote superior personal qualities, the Bahá'í Faith makes an important distinction between rank and spiritual station. The Universal House of Justice offers the following admonition to those occupying a rank in society and a reassurance to those who do not: "The true spiritual station of any soul is known only to God. It is quite a different thing from the ranks and stations that men and women occupy in the various sectors of society" (*Messages*, par. 206.5). Bahá'u'lláh graphically underscores this important distinction in one of His Tablets thus:

Know thou moreover that in the Day of His Manifestation all things besides God shall be brought forth and placed equally, irrespective of their rank being high or low. . . . When the Word of God is revealed unto all created things whoso then giveth ear and heedeth the Call is, indeed, reckoned among the most distinguished souls, though he be a carrier of ashes. And he who turneth away is accounted as the lowliest of His servants, though he be a ruler amongst men and the possessor of all the books that are in the heavens and on earth. (*Tablets* 186)

While personal accomplishment is encouraged and the expertise and contributions of people of rank are respected and appreciated, the ultimate aim in life, for a Bahá'í, is to attain spiritual excellence. 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes, "the happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems" (23–24).

The distinction between rank and spiritual station in the Bahá'í Faith has important implications: it serves to discourage ambition in seeking election or appointment to positions of rank in the administrative order, and it limits the legitimate respect accorded to people of rank by avoiding veneration of their views or adopting them as a model to be imitated.

Personal Attitudes

The Bahá'í writings call for a high standard of personal conduct in relation to the performance of the functions associated with rank. Those assigned rank in the Bahá'í administrative order are warned, in the strongest terms, about the dangers of abuse of their position. The Universal House of Justice has referred to a letter written on behalf of the Guardian in which "He pointed out how, in the past, it was certain individuals who 'accounted themselves as superior in knowledge and elevated in position' who caused division, and that it was those 'who pretended to be the most distinguished of all' who 'always proved themselves to be the source of contention'" (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Messages*, par. 111.12). The House of Justice asserts that "those who occupy ranks should never exploit their position or regard themselves as being superior to others," and it advises those who are not appointed to a high position to avoid "envy and jealousy" (*Messages*, par. 206.3). The standard for behavior expected of the believers is summarized in the following statement of the Universal House of Justice: "Courtesy, reverence, dignity, respect for the rank and achievements of others are virtues which contribute to the harmony and well-being of every community, but pride and self-aggrandizement are among the most deadly of sins" (*Messages*, par. 111.12).

As noted above, the admonition concerning showing respect for people of rank does not impose the necessity of blind obedience to them or the adoption of a posture of servility.

Distinctive Features

The review of the Bahá'í concept of rank within its administrative order would be incomplete without drawing attention to some of its distinctive features. As stated above, the assignment of rank is essentially to enable vital functions to be performed appropriately. It is not a motivational factor for ambition or aspiration. The Bahá'í approach is to accept election or appointment with humility, in a spirit of service, free from the taint of ambition.

Another distinctive feature is that there is no specific qualification for election or appointment such as education, longevity in the Faith, family connection, professional accomplishment or material endowments. Those called upon to elect or appoint are enjoined to do so on the basis of fitness to perform the required function.

Power and authority do not come with rank. Authority rests with elected Assemblies, the officers or representatives of which are constrained to act under the direction of the corporate body. All believers of rank, including individual Assembly members as well as those appointed to perform prescribed duties, are subject to Bahá'í law and are debarred from invoking exalted rank as a means of escaping the application of this law.

These features, taken together, provide assurance that the values of rank will be fully exploited in Bahá'í administrative development, and its harmful features excluded.

Bahíyyih Khánum—The Example of Her Life

The discussion so far has examined the need for rank in society and religion, assessed the challenges associated with the exercise of rank, and outlined the provisions in the Bahá'í teachings that are designed not only to uphold the social advantages of rank but also to remove its potential to cause injustice and oppression. While these provisions might be considered as representing a formulation at a level of principle, an examination of the conduct of Bahíyyih Khánum, who is assigned an exalted rank in the Bahá'í Dispensation, provides useful insight into both the role to be played by people of rank in the Bahá'í social system, and the behavior they are called upon to manifest in performing their functions.

Her Rank

Bahíyyih Khánum ranks as "foremost among the members of her sex in the Bahá'í Dispensation" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 63). Bahá'u'lláh Himself conferred upon His daughter, Bahíyyih Khánum, a unique position, addressing her in the following words: "Verily, We have elevated thee to the rank of one of the most distinguished among thy sex, and granted thee, in My court, a station such as none other woman hath surpassed. Thus have We preferred thee and raised thee above the rest, as a sign of grace from Him Who is the Lord of the throne on high and earth below" (qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 3).

Though the Greatest Holy Leaf's rank derived from her family background, family membership was not sufficient in and of itself. Her elevation to such a high rank also depended on her actions and on the qualities she manifested in performing her assigned functions. Through these, she, in the words of the Guardian, "abundantly demonstrated her worthiness to rank as one of the noblest figures intimately associated with the life-long work of Bahá'u'lláh" (qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 35).

To appreciate the uniqueness of the life and contribution of Bahíyyih Khánum it is important to understand the social and cultural context from which she emerged. Middle Eastern women at the time were largely invisible. The majority were deprived of education and lacked status within their communities. They were veiled, obliged to lead a cloistered existence separated from all men except the members of their immediate family. They were excluded from participation in the world outside the home and had no real formal role in religion. By bestowing a special station and rank on His daughter, and by assigning to her a unique role in the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh overturned traditional cultural practices and dramatically affirmed the value of women's contribution to history and their role in the public sphere.

Functions Associated with Rank

Bahíyyih Khánum was assigned specific functions to perform at different stages of her life. These functions reflected the evolving needs of the Bahá'í community. They demanded ever-increasing levels of responsibility and required the Greatest Holy Leaf to assume an increasingly visible role.

As a child she shared the sufferings and exiles of her father. During her teenage years in Baghdád, she not only assisted her mother with the management of the household, which was itself a complex undertaking carried out in a hostile and insecure environment, but was also given special highly sensitive assignments by Bahá'u'lláh. Unfortunately, the details of these tasks appear not to have been recorded. Later, in Adrianople, at a time when Bahá'u'lláh's leadership was under challenge and the community was riven with disunity, Bahíyyih Khánum demonstrated her capacity for leadership by using her personal skills, tact, and knowledge in an attempt to heal some of the divisions.

Following the death of Bahá'u'lláh in 1892, and the appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá as Bahá'u'lláh's designated successor and head of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahíyyih Khánum actively supported her brother's initiatives and assumed responsibility for attending to the spiritual and physical needs of a growing number of pilgrims. During 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels in the West in 1911–13, she acted as His trusted deputy, managing the affairs of the Faith in the Holy Land and serving as the point of contact and source of advice and encouragement for the Bahá'ís through out the world.

Following the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the appointment of His grandson Shoghi Effendi as His successor and Guardian of the Faith, the newly appointed Guardian called upon the Greatest Holy Leaf to act as the designated head of the religion for a brief period, at a critical juncture in its history. Shocked by the sudden death of his grandfather and conscious of the weighty task ahead of him, and wishing to prepare himself for this unexpected responsibility, Shoghi Effendi decided to absent himself from the Holy Land for extended periods of time. Prior to his initial departure for Switzerland he entrusted the affairs of the Bahá'í Faith at home and abroad to "the supervision of the members of the Holy Family and the headship of the Greatest Holy Leaf" (qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 3). At the time of her appointment, Bahíyyih Khánum was in the seventy-sixth year of her life.

Bahíyyih Khánum's appointment to the headship of the Bahá'í Faith, though intended as an interim arrangement during the extended absences of Shoghi Effendi in the years 1922–24, was not simply a ceremonial position, nor was she a mere figurehead. Shoghi Effendi's mandate was all-encompassing—it specified for her the primary position within the Holy

Family, and defined the range of responsibilities as including the direction of the affairs of the religion at home and abroad, and the conduct of business with the world at large. The extent of her authority is made explicit in a letter dated April 5, 1922, from Shoghi Effendi to the representative of the government in the Holy Land: "As I am compelled to leave Haifa for reasons of health, I have named as my representative during my absence, the sister of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahíyyih Khánum." The Guardian's letter also goes on to inform the authorities that he has appointed a committee "To assist her to conduct the affairs of the Bahá'í Movement in this country and elsewhere," and he makes it clear that the committee chairman's authority to act was dependent on the written endorsement of Bahíyyih Khánum (qtd. in Rabbani 276).

During the absences of the Guardian, the Greatest Holy Leaf was the designated point of authority, the channel for communication, and the source of reliable information and guidance for the Bahá'í community. Through her extensive correspondence with Bahá'ís and Bahá'í institutions and her contacts with pilgrims she educated and empowered the believers concerning the implications of the provisions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament and the importance of establishing the administrative order. In this way she assisted the community to make the transition from the Heroic Age of the Faith to the Formative Age.

Bahíyyih Khánum was in her seventy-ninth year when the Guardian returned to Haifa in 1924. Until her death in 1932 she was a source of encouragement and support to Shoghi Effendi. She continued to meet and inspire the pilgrims and she maintained an active interest in the advancement and development of the Faith until her last days.

Examples of Her Behavior

From a study of the life of Bahíyyih Khánum it is evident that she gained the respect of the believers, not simply because of her designated rank, but also because of her qualities and the exemplary way in which she carried out her assigned functions and the enormous contribution she made to the development of the Bahá'í community. Indeed, her life provides a unique perspective on the issue of rank and its role in society, and on the manner in which the responsibilities associated with rank might be discharged so

as to foster social cohesion and individual initiative. In this regard, it is interesting to examine the nature of her relationships, her approach to leadership, and her attitude towards change.

The way in which Bahíyyih Khánum carried out her functions differs markedly from many contemporary models of people of high rank. She avoided the socially destructive abuse so often associated with rank, such as the sense of superiority or exclusiveness, the tendency towards self-promotion, and the exercise of authoritarian power. On the contrary, Shoghi Effendi states that Bahíyyih Khánum possessed "an unaffected simplicity of manners; an extreme sociability which made her accessible to all" and "a quiet and unassuming disposition that served to enhance a thousandfold the prestige of her exalted rank" (qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 42–43). In addition, she manifested "a tenderness of heart that obliterated every distinction of creed, class and colour" (qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 42).

Personal humility and modesty were outstanding characteristics of the Greatest Holy Leaf. Illustrative of this is her response to Shoghi Effendi's appointment of her to the headship of the Faith, she writes: "During his absence . . . this prisoner is appointed to administer the affairs of the Faith, in consultation with the members of the Holy Household" (qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 115). She did not seek power or position for herself, though she willingly fulfilled the administrative tasks to which she was assigned. Indeed, no task was too menial or too unimportant for her to undertake. She seized the opportunities for service that came her way. It is also noteworthy that she did not take advantage of her high rank to impose her will on others, nor did she use her position to seek redress for sufferings inflicted upon her in the past.

All who had the opportunity to meet the Greatest Holy Leaf were attracted to her presence. As reported by one of the pilgrims, Bahíyyih Khánum's "strong yet gentle quality of authority made her naturally the head of the household group that circled around 'Abdu'l-Bahá" (Cooper 202–3). Another pilgrim left the following record of her impressions of the Greatest Holy Leaf and the lessons she drew from her example. She writes,

Her balance, sense of fineness and fitness and practical judgment she displayed in creating order and grace in the household, and all the elements that make for well-being she blended in an ambience of harmony.

Her strong will was never used to override and her decided opinions were never pressed upon another. Her ways were gentle. Others might break the shell with a blow; it was for her to unsheathe the kernel with infinite care and skill. In her you met with no exactions, no biddance: she beckoned, smiling, and would have no one come heavy-footed or bent to her will. So quietly did she make her influence felt that you were scarcely conscious of its working. (Morton 181)

The Greatest Holy Leaf's approach to leadership illustrates her skill in bringing to bear both a sense of organization and order and a unifying spirit. Her attitude toward friend and enemy of the Faith, to high and low was constructive, sensitive, respectful, and invariably patient. She modeled a leadership style that exemplified nurturance, trust, and encouragement. She was a force for unity and understanding actively supporting and collaborating with the embryonic Spiritual Assemblies. While placing a high value on the promotion of unity, she did not retreat from adherence to principle, even should that give rise to conflict, nor hesitate to call attention to the Bahá'í standard and, where necessary, to set limits. The unity she fostered was based on spiritual and administrative principles rather than on compromise.

As stated earlier, it is not unusual for people of rank in religion to actively resist change in an attempt to preserve the status quo and their personal power and prestige. Striking features of the life of Bahíyyih Khánum were her willingness to embrace change and her ability to adapt to its requirements. In the course of her lifetime she experienced poverty, exile, imprisonment and war, the loss of family and loved ones. She witnessed the introduction of the Bahá'í Covenant, the ordained changes in the leadership of the Bahá'í community, attacks on the Faith by the ambitious and disaffected, and ultimately the transformation of the fortunes of the religion with the rise of its administrative order and the expansion of the Faith throughout the world.

The Greatest Holy Leaf did not cling to the past nor did she passively accept what came her way. Her response was not simply fatalistic. Her attitude toward change was realistic, principled and strategic. She understood that times do not stay the same, and that changing conditions require new solutions and approaches. She not only continually renewed her own

knowledge of the guidance contained in the teachings, but she also fostered innovation and change. She called the believers' attention to the new circumstances and opportunities for service that existed because of the evolution of the Faith and she encouraged them to review their practices in light of past experience and of the new situation that prevailed. The vital role she played during the critical period of transition that coincided with her headship of the religion is a primary illustration of the Greatest Holy Leaf's orientation towards change.

Conclusion

The Bahá'í Faith stands unique among the world's religious traditions in its approach to rank, recognizing the need for this differentiation of position and function but avoiding its harmful effects. As the "archetype of the people of Bahá" (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Bahíyyih Khánum* 30) the Greatest Holy Leaf is a model and inspiration for all members of the Bahá'í community, male as well as female. Reflecting on the life of Bahíyyih Khánum, the highest-ranking woman in the Bahá'í Dispensation, provides fresh insights into the operation of rank as a positive social force. The manner in which she performed her assigned functions demonstrates that it is possible, not only to avoid the sense of superiority, the conservatism, and the traditional abuses of power that so frequently characterize the behavior of elites, but also to serve as an agent of change, committed to the encouragement of innovation and to fostering an enduring unity, based on principle, among the widely divergent elements of society.

Notes

1. For a discussion see Robert Nisbet, "Sociology and Religion," in Mircea Eliade, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 13 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 385–93.

2. See Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996), par. 229–30.

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