

A difficult case: Beyer's categories and the Bahá'í Faith

Sen McGlinn

[Source: 'A difficult case: Beyer's categories and the Bahá'í Faith' in *Social Compass* 50(2), 2003, 247-255]

Margit Warburg has presented data showing that the Bahá'í community of Denmark represents an excellent case of Beyer's 'liberal option' in its response to globalisation. She also claims, incorrectly, that the Bahá'í Faith has the "ultimate aim of merging political and religious institutions." The Baha'i Faith represents a paradoxical example in terms of Beyer's categories. Its values include relativism, pluralism, globalisation, a cosmopolitan ethic and democratic government. But it also seeks to give political and legal effect to these religious values, for instance by supporting the United Nations and advocating a world court. Beyer considers that a religious movement which seeks to have religious norms enshrined in legislation has adopted the 'conservative option' in response to globalisation. Is this a useful categorisation, when the religious norms are liberal and the stage on which they are to be implemented is global?

In 'Baha'i: A Religious Approach to Globalization' (*Social Compass* 46(1) 1999), Margit Warburg applies Beyer's work on religious responses to globalisation to the Bahá'í community, particularly in Denmark. Beyer's 'conservative' option refers to communities that resist relativism and pluralism and seek to have their religious norms enshrined in legislation (Beyer, 1994: 92), while the 'liberal' option embraces the globalization process and its attendant pluralism. Warburg states that the "Baha'i may represent an excellent case of the liberal option, while simultaneously sharing with the conservative option the ultimate goal of merging the religious institutions with the political institutions." (p. 49).

The difficulty with this is that she presents evidence from source texts and from original field studies to show the depth of the cosmopolitan, liberal, orientation of the Bahá'í community, but her evidence for the existence of this supposed ultimate conservative goal is limited to short citations from two individual Bahá'ís, which do not support the conclusions she draws. One advocates that governments adopt "a holistic viewpoint, embracing not only the interests of the present but of the future, and of the environment, as well as humanity," a formulation reminiscent of Beyer's religious environmentalism (Warburg p. 54,

citing Huddleston, 1993). The second says that “religion is indispensable for the establishment of a universal ethics (p. 54, citing Schaefer, 1994). She refers to two other Bahá’í authors (Heller 1997; Boyles 1997) who, she says, “criticize the idea of a democracy which is based on secular liberalism”. In both cases Warburg seems to have misunderstood the authors: Heller says that “secular liberal philosophy was never intended to [do more than] provide a theory of neutral arbitration among the various individuals and communities over which the modern state has jurisdiction” (Heller, 1997: 200). Heller does not mention democracy, and claims only that secular liberalism is not in itself sufficient. Boyles does not mention liberalism, but cites various contemporary authors -- none of whom are Bahá’ís so far as I know -- who criticize the values of contemporary democratic societies. Boyles also says that “most agree that democracy -- in a form giving less emphasis on consumerism and more on the responsibilities inherent in citizenship -- is the answer.” (p. 226) In short, the four authors mentioned fit squarely into Warburg’s description of the liberal option, which “does not involve incorporating religious issues into law and political decision-making. Its problem is how to establish a contribution to society which is seen as specifically *religious*.” Boyles for example speaks of allowing “religions” (note the plural) “to take a role in the assertion of values in the public sphere” (p. 231).

Moreover Warburg herself states that the Baha’is “propose a radical strengthening of the power of the UN institutions” (p. 53) and cites a 1995 letter from the leadership of the community stating that UN summits represent a “gradual movement towards the ultimate fulfilment of the will of Bahá’u’lláh that *the rulers of nations* meet to consult and decide on the outstanding issues in an increasingly global society” (p. 52, emphasis added). It would be odd indeed to seek the involvement of national governments in solving global problems, while also seeking to displace those governments.

Yet odder things have been known in the history of religions. Belief systems are not automatically coherent. The Bahá’í Faith is not a monolith, having the same meaning for all; nor is it unchanging in either practice or doctrine. Bahá’ís are quite capable of acting in ways contradicting the teachings they themselves call Bahá’í, and of declaring ideas to be Bahá’í teachings which contradict official doctrines. Warburg has in fact almost put her finger on an issue.

There is a certain tension between liberal and conservative political options in the case of the Bahá'í Faith, and I may be able to show where to look for it, if not to define it completely.

To begin with, we have to distinguish two 'moments' in considering Bahá'í as a response to the impact of globalisation. The first is as a response to the impact of the West in Iran and the Middle East in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This is the response recorded in the religion's sacred texts. It has been examined, specifically in relation to the project of modernity, by Cole (1998). The second 'response' is the adoption of the Bahá'í Faith by converts in the West and in the third world at various times in the 20th century. Their reasons for adopting the new religion, the parts of its teachings that are accepted, and the effects on the converts' lives would be expected to differ in each place and generation. At this level of analysis one cannot speak of "Bahá'í" as one thing. There are commonalities between the reception of a version of the Bahá'í Faith in the millennialist and cultic milieu of America 1900-1920, and its reception by Southern Blacks and WASP peace activists in the 1960s, but there are also considerable differences. Because one cannot take the primary texts and results of fieldwork as mutually explanatory aspects of a single sociological phenomenon, and because of the effects of inculturation in different settings, the Bahá'í Faith cannot be studied simply as a new religious movement.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817--1892) is the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. His writings, together with those of his son 'Abdu'l-Bahá and great-grandson Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, comprise Bahá'í scriptures and their authoritative interpretation. The historian Mangol Bayat has remarked that Bahá'u'lláh:

... embraced what no Muslim sect, no Muslim school of thought ever succeeded in or dared to try: the doctrinal acceptance of the de facto secularization of politics which had occurred in the Muslim world centuries earlier. (1982: 130.)

Cole's historical work, and my own theological study (McGlenn, 1999) confirm Bayat's evaluation: Bahá'u'lláh's political views, and particularly the way he establishes a theological grounding for democratic government and the separation

of church and state, are among Bahá'u'lláh's most important contributions to religious modernism. The differentiation of the sovereignty of the religious and political orders, and the wholehearted acceptance of the legitimacy of the political order, are repeated and central themes in Bahá'u'lláh's writings. One example will suffice:

The one true God ... hath ever regarded, and will continue to regard, the hearts of men as His own, His exclusive possession. All else, whether pertaining to land or sea, whether riches or glory, He hath bequeathed unto the kings and rulers of the earth. ... The instruments which are essential to the immediate protection, the security and assurance of the human race have been entrusted to the hands, and lie in the grasp, of the governors of human society. This is the wish of God and His decree....¹

To perceive the radical nature of this acceptance, one must bear in mind that Bahá'u'lláh claimed to be the eschatological Promised One (Qá'im, Mihdi, Messiah, or Christ returned). The various Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, whether they accepted or rejected the legitimacy of human government as a matter of tactical accommodation, have all believed that divine government will replace human government in the eschaton. But for the Bahá'is the eschaton has already happened, the Messiah has come and, unexpectedly, He has endorsed rule by 'the governors of human society'. Messianism has been disarmed by being fulfilled.

`Abdu'l-Bahá wrote a treatise on the religious and civil leadership in society, the *Risálih-yi Siyasiyyah* (1893). This draws extensively on Iranian and Ottoman political history to demonstrate that the separation of church and state and freedom of conscience are prerequisites for good government, while the interference of religion in government has always brought disaster. Religious leaders, he says, do not enter the political sphere because:

... the affairs of leadership and government, of kingdom and subjects, already have a respected object of authority, an appointed source, whereas a different holy centre and distinct wellspring exists with regard to guidance, religion, knowledge, education, and the promulgation of good morals and

of the virtues of true humanity. These latter souls have nothing to do with affairs of civil leadership, nor do they seek to interfere in them. Thus, in this most great cycle of the maturity and adulthood of the world, this matter has been put into the text of the divine Book ... Thus is it written in the Book of the Covenant [i.e., Bahá'u'lláh's *Kitáb-i `Ahd*] ... whose decree is decisive ...

“O ye the loved ones and the trustees of God! Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth, and hath singled out the hearts of men as His own domain. Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. This is a decree of God in this Most Great Revelation. *It is divinely preserved from annulment ...*”

Shoghi Effendi, `Abdu'l-Bahá's grandson and the only person able to produce authoritative interpretations of Bahá'í scriptures, draws a concrete conclusion from these principles in one of his key works, when he writes that the Bahá'ís must not “under any circumstances,” ... “allow the machinery of their administration to supersede the government of their respective countries.” (1932: 66).

Therefore if we are speaking of the formal religion, as evidenced in the religion's texts, Warburg's statement that the Baha'i have “the ultimate goal of merging the religious institutions with the political institutions” is the reverse of the actual situation. Nevertheless, there are Bahá'ís who support theocratic ideas, but as she notes herself, in ‘Enemies of the Faith’ (p. 73), the popular religion contains many teachings that are not part of the official religion.

What makes the Bahá'í community a difficult case for the outside researcher is the peculiar circumstance that the ‘official religion’ is not defined by those now in authority. `Abdu'l-Bahá separated the functions of defining doctrine and administering the affairs of the community, delegating the sphere of scriptural interpretation and doctrine to his grandson Shoghi Effendi, while administrative authority was vested in an elected body, the Universal House of Justice.² Shoghi Effendi, whom he designated as ‘the Guardian’, died in 1957 and had no successor as ‘authorised interpreter’.

The Universal House of Justice is a popularly elected lay body responsible for the affairs of the global Bahá'í community. It is not authorised to define doctrine, and there is no requirement that its members have a particular level of knowledge of Bahá'í teachings. In terms of the usual sociological distinction between official and popular religion, the Universal House of Justice and its dependent institutions at the World Centre in Haifa represent a comprehensive and perhaps rationalised version of the popular religion.

Beyer's 'conservative' option is defined in two ways. It refers to communities that resist relativism and pluralism -- which is not generally the case with the Bahá'í community, as Warburg has shown -- and also to those that seek to have their own religious norms enshrined in legislation (Beyer, 1994: 92). Bahá'ís clearly do hope that their values will shape political, legal and cultural life, and this can be demonstrated both in the primary texts and in the lives of contemporary Bahá'ís. Are they therefore 'conservative' in Beyer's sense? The values that Bahá'ís claim and evince include relativism, pluralism, globalisation, a cosmopolitan ethic, democratic political institutions, equality before the law, a free press, freedom of conscience and openness to the future. An agnostic or atheist who supported these values and sought to give them political and legal effect would undoubtedly be classified as a political liberal. Should a Bahá'í who supports the same values, but considers them also to be religious values, be considered a religious conservative?

Bahá'ís, as Warburg notes (p. 54) aim to establish their religious law as the constitutional basis for society.³ She concludes that the Bahá'ís "attack a core aspect of the Enlightenment programme ... the separation of religious and political doctrines and institutions." But the 'religious law' in question is Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws, the *Kitáb-i Aqdas* which, in a passage addressed to 'the kings of the earth', states, "It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men." (Paragraph 83). The same book condemns many of the absolutist rulers of Bahá'u'lláh's time, predicts a democratic government in Iran, and demands that the 'Presidents of the republics' of America should rule with justice. Is the Enlightenment project being rejected here, or has it been transfigured by being given the mark of divine approval? Religious language *about* politics should not be confused with a claim to religious hegemony *over*

politics. If religion is to take its place in global society as a ‘global religious system’ (Beyer, 1998) it will be necessary to formulate religious grounds for the wholehearted acceptance of the functional differentiation of world society, including the legitimacy of human government. If religion is distinguished from non-religion primarily as a modality of communication (ibid, 24), this acceptance will have to be expressed in religious terms, that is, as a theology of the state. This, I contend, is what we find in the Bahá’í scriptures and the interpretations of them that are considered authoritative (those of `Abdu’l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi).

If we turn to the second ‘moment’ of the Bahá’í Faith, as a contemporary religious response to globalisation, it becomes more difficult to place the Bahá’í Faith, even if we consider only the Western communities. The great majority of Bahá’ís in the West are simply unaware of the Bahá’í political teachings, and if asked about them may produce highly variable answers reflecting a variety of factors. Moreover no great clarity in handling political concepts can be expected from most believers: a respondent or author may appear to be arguing against the institutional separation of church and state, while in fact being concerned with the desacralisation of life or a perceived decline in values. The polemical situation that an author addresses is an additional complication, for while the accusation that Bahá’í administrative institutions are eventually to supersede governments is a frequently repeated canard in the anti-Bahá’í polemical literature in the West,⁴ anti-Bahá’í attacks in Iran have claimed that Bahá’í advocacy of the separation of church and state shows that they are ‘western’ and hostile to the basis of the Iranian constitution. One would therefore expect to find some difference between recent Iranian immigrants and other ethnic groups in the Bahá’í community. A sensitive ‘reading’ of the situation of each author or speaker will be required to correctly understand their stated beliefs, before these can be described as liberal or conservative in relation to globalisation.

In her paper, Warburg’s presents the results of fieldwork in Denmark, at the Bahá’í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, and elsewhere under the heading ‘Liberal and cosmopolitan positions among Baha’is’, but she does not claim that she actually encountered any contemporary Bahá’ís who represent the ‘conservative option’, in Beyer’s terms. In the time since her paper was published, an important letter sent by the Universal House of Justice (7 April 1999) to Bahá’í communities around the

world has referred to "a campaign of internal opposition to the Teachings." Among the errors which the Universal House of Justice identifies is "the assertion that the modern political concept of 'separation of church and state' is somehow one that Baha'u'llah intended as a basic principle of the World Order He has founded."⁵ This letter to some extent supplies the substantiation lacking in Warburg's article, in that the Universal House of Justice would indeed seem to have the "ultimate aim of merging political and religious institutions."⁶ But the letter also shows an awareness that this position is not undisputed in the community at large. In recent years the topic has been subject to much discussion on Bahá'í internet discussion groups, and can be traced from the mid 1990s in the archives of these lists. As for earlier years, a member of the H-Bahai list (September 10, 2001), writes:

I was born in a Baha'i family in the United States ... For as long as I can remember, there were Baha'is who asserted that the local Spiritual Assembly was destined to assume all of the functions of local government and the National Spiritual Assemblies to do the same with national governments. ... And there were those, and I was eventually among them ... who disagreed and asserted that the Baha'i writings do not seem to say that. ... the more scholarly Baha'i types tended to believe that civil government would exist beside the Baha'i institutions in the future, while most Baha'is who had not studied the matter with any seriousness took the other side.

McMullen's sociological study of the contemporary Bahá'í community of Atlanta, which also post-dates Warburg's paper, gives another picture of the rank and file opinion. McMullen shows that Bahá'ís in Atlanta suppose that the elected Bahá'í religious bodies (the 'Bahá'í Administrative Order') will fulfil the functions of government, while simultaneously recognizing that the official Bahá'í principles forbid these bodies from interfering with "matters of public and civil jurisdiction." McMullen's findings show that his respondents are aware of the contradiction in these positions: "When I ask Bahá'ís what will be the relationship between the Atlanta [Bahá'í institution] and the Atlanta City Council ... they confess they do not know, and are not sure how that relationship will evolve ... Bahá'ís 'take it on faith' that the UHJ will advise local and national institutions on these emerging

relationships, which likely will evolve over hundreds of years." (McMullen, 2000: 62-3; see also 8, 58, 59, 103, 141). This speaks of confusion rather than conservatism. His study does not report finding any Bahá'ís with a clear ideological position that would correspond to Beyer's conservative option. Some conservative attitudes in relation to globalisation are evident in his study, but they are not operationalised in attitudes to government, political activism or voting: rather the contradiction with liberal attitudes on other aspects of globalisation is perceived by the subjects themselves, and its resolution has been postponed to the indefinite future.

The sociological features of the Danish Bahá'í community which Warburg has found, particularly their political liberalism as shown in voting patterns and membership of globalising organisations (Warburg, 1999: 50-52), combined with the explicit teachings of the formal religion as described above, make it unlikely that Bahá'ís who say they do not believe in democracy or in the separation of church and state would also have sufficient commitment to operationalise these beliefs. The 'conservative option' in the face of globalisation is present, but it is attenuated. It is in part a rhetorical vestige of the millennialist background of the Bahá'í community and in part the result of reading religious language about politics as an implicit claim to religious hegemony: a confusion of terms rather than a stance of resistance to globalisation.⁷

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Universal House of Justice, 7 April 1999, letter available in electronic format from <http://bahai-library.org/compilations/issues.scholarship.html>

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Sen McGLINN studied English and Christian Theology at the University of Otago, New Zealand, and is now a student of Islamic Studies and Persian at the University of Leiden, the Netherlands.

sen.sonja@casema.NL

1. The Lawh-i Ashraf, in Shoghi Effendi (tr.) *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CII, pp. 206--7. Further examples can be found in most of Bahá'u'lláh's principal works, excepting the mystical and ethical works. For extensive treatments of Bahá'u'lláh's political thought with more extensive citations and sources see Cole (1998) and McGlinn (1999).
2. In the *Will and Testament of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, tr. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1968, and a commentary on this by Shoghi Effendi in *The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh*, Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1934, in the chapter 'The Administrative Order'.
3. See, e.g., Shoghi Effendi, 1958: 155.
4. Francesco Ficicchia, *Der Bahá'ismus: Religion der Zukunft?*, 1981 throughout (see index, 'theocracy'); Christian J. Jäggi, *Zum interreligiösen Dialog zwischen Christentum, Islam und Baha'itum*. Frankfurt am Main: Haag + Herchen, 1987 (Dissertation, Zürich) p. 150; William McElwee Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its history and teachings*, South Pasadena, Calif., William Carey Library, 1974, pp. 160, 290; Denis MacEoin (under pseudonym of Daniel Easterman), *New Jerusalems, Reflections on Islam, Fundamentalism and the Rushdie affair*, London, Harper Collins, 1992, (pp. 184-189).
5. The letter cites as its authority "Shoghi Effendi's explanation of Baha'u'llah's vision of the future Baha'i World Commonwealth that will unite spiritual and civil authority." I have not been able to locate any source for this in Shoghi Effendi's published writings in English: it would appear to be a conflation of two terms used frequently throughout Shoghi Effendi's works, the first a political 'commonwealth of nations', which is to be headed by a federal government under an international executive, legislature and judicial arm, and the second a 'Bahá'í Commonwealth' (capitalised) whose sole 'supreme organ' is the Universal House of Justice.
6. It does not appear to be consistent with previous letters from the Universal House of Justice on this topic. A letter dated 25 July 1988 stated that "Baha'i administration and the civil administration are two separate entities." An earlier message (13 April 1983) took a similar line. Another letter from the 1980s or earlier states that "the functions of these two bodies should be kept distinct, even if their memberships [are] identical" (cited in Hornby, 1988: 447-8). The contradictions do not represent a doctrinal difficulty for the Bahá'ís, since decisions of the Universal House of Justice reflect the understanding and needs of the time and are explicitly subject to change.

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. For further contemporary evidence of conservative stances see Cole, Juan R. I., 'Fundamentalism in the Contemporary Baha'i Faith,' forthcoming.