

MIKHAIL SERGEEV

*Bahá'í Teachings and the Principle of Separation between Religion and State**

Mikhail Sergeev holds his master's degree and a doctorate in religious studies from Temple University, Philadelphia. He teaches history of religion, philosophy and modern art at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. He is the author of several books, including *Sophiology in Russian Orthodoxy: Solov'ev, Bulgakov, Losskii, Berdiaev*.

Introductory remarks

Separation of religion and state is one of the controversial issues in Bahá'í scholarship. Christian critics often blame the Bahá'í Faith for promoting theocracy and seeking to merge religion with state. Already in 1915, Samuel Wilson, in his study of the Bahá'í religion argues, "Baháism has set forth a system of civil government. Claiming to be a revelation from God, it has enunciated the laws and regulations of the future State."¹ Quoting from early Bahá'ís who believed that Bahá'í Houses of Justice would eventually replace the civil authorities and governments,² Wilson concludes that:

Councils infallible and absolute, superior to appeal or protest; deciding and exacting obedience in every department of the life of humanity – religious, domestic, social, educational, financial, judicial, and political [– will represent a religious-political regime,] a priesthood such as the world has not yet seen.³

Later, in the 1970s, another Christian polemical writer, William Miller, in his book about the new religious movement, restates the same charge that

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1 Samuel Graham Wilson, *Baháism and Its Claims: A Study of the Religion Promulgated by Baha Ullah and Abdul Baha* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1915), p. 141.

2. Wilson quotes Dreyfus and Remey – *ibid.*, p. 143.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 145.

the Bahá'í Faith aims at combining the spheres of church and state into one religio-political realm.⁴

On the other side of the spectrum and in recent years, some dissident Bahá'í scholars have challenged the apparently prevailing theocratic aspirations of their religious community. Such scholars as, for instance, Juan Cole in his book *Modernity and the Millenium*, argues that the founders of the Bahá'í Faith were, in fact, modernists and advocated the separation of religion and state as well as pluralistic multi-party democracy on a global scale. Cole wrote that “Baha'u'llah on numerous occasions made it quite clear that he and his religion accepted the separation of religion and state.”⁵ He points out that:

Classical Shi'ite doctrine . . . has held that all power, civil and religious, should be concentrated in the hands of an infallible imam, and even the compromises of Shi'ite political theory in the nineteenth century had not recognized a true separation of religion and state. Baha'u'llah, claiming to be the promised one of Islam, would have been justified in the terms of this tradition in claiming the prerogative of rule. But he refused to do so, either for himself or for his religion. He repudiated the entire notion of an absolutist state, and of a theocratic one.⁶

Another controversial author, Sen McGlinn, in his book on postmodern Bahá'í theology, makes an even more radical claim that the principle of separation between church and state represents the essential teaching of all Abrahamic traditions, including Islam and the Bahá'í Faith. McGlinn is convinced that “it is evident that the question of church and state is universal, not to be addressed in terms of Shiah or Islamic or Christian or Western essentialisms.”⁷ He writes:

The functional differentiation of society in successful contemporary societies entails not just the separation of institutions, but also the differentiation of the individual's roles as citizen, fellow-believer, scientist and economic agent. Although religion has great potential in mobilizing the masses, any attempt to achieve political modernization by appealing to this power sacrifices the most fundamental principle

4. William McElwer Miller, *The Baha'i Faith: Its History and Teaching* (South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1974).

5. Juan R. I. Cole, *Modernity and the Millenium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1998), p. 34.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 35-36.

7. Sen McGlinn, *Church and State: A Postmodern Political Theology, Book One* (Leiden, Netherlands: Leiden Univ, 2005), p. 137.

of modernization: the separation of the religious and political spheres.⁸

My article aims at revisiting the controversial theme of separation between religion and state in its relation to Bahá'í teachings as found in the sacred scriptures of this religion.

Separation of church and state

The principle of separation of religion and state was formulated in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by the Enlightenment thinkers in Europe. A French protestant scholar, Pierre Bayle, was one of its early proponents back in the seventeenth century. Bayle's advocacy of religious freedom was, in the words of one historian of the Enlightenment, ". . . not intended to serve any particular faith, but [established] a universal, purely philosophical goal and [represented] a principle, which is equally valid and binding for every form of belief."⁹

Another Protestant philosopher, the "patron philosopher of liberalism" John Locke in his *Letters Concerning Toleration* set up this principle on a solid theoretical ground by distinguishing "the business of civil government from that of religion, and [settling] the just bound that lie between the one and the other."¹⁰

Overall, the Enlightenment thinkers developed a new attitude toward religion and its role in society. They made a case for universal tolerance and argued that freedom of conscience should be granted to all members of society whatever religion they profess, if any. As François Voltaire pointed out: "Discord is the great ill of mankind, and tolerance is the only remedy for it."¹¹ The practical instrument for securing tolerance and freedom of conscience was the separation of public and private spheres, or the domains of government and religion. Again, as Voltaire put it, "the authority of the clergy is, and can, be spiritual only . . . [it] should not have any temporal power," while the civil government "must permit no enterprise which puts the members of society in external and civil dependence on an ecclesiastical body."¹² This way, the proper balance between religious and secular institutions is maintained, a balance that prevents these institutions from corrupting each other.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 147.

9. Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 167.

10. John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. by Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), p. 82.

11. François Voltaire, "Reflections on Religion," *ibid.*, p. 130.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 117.

Practically speaking, the separation between religion and state entails at least three things. First, religious organizations should not participate in civil government and in making laws. Next, the civil authorities, in their turn, should not privilege some religions and prohibit others. Finally, the state institutions should not interfere with the private lives of the citizens, and their religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) must not be one of the criteria for holding public office.

In the American legal tradition these provisions are found in the Article 6 of and the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution of the United States. A scholar of religion in America, Julia Corbett, explains in her book on the subject:

Article 6 prohibits religious requirements for holding public office . . . The First Amendment to the Constitution [in its] “establishment clause” says that the United States Congress cannot make any religion the official religion of the United States. It cannot act in a way that gives preferential treatment or support to one religion above others. Nor can it support religion or non-religion generally, one over the other . . . The second . . . “free exercise” clause . . . states that the government cannot interfere with any person’s religion. [Finally, the] Fourteenth Amendment holds that the states as well are not to “abridge the privileges” of their citizens, including the privilege of religious freedom.¹³

Historically, the establishment of the separation between religion and state in Western countries was paralleled by the rise of so-called “secularism” – modern culture that was neutral, if not indifferent, to religion, its beliefs, practices and values. Religion often found itself on the periphery of private sphere while, in the public sphere its role significantly decreased. One of the most important functions of religion as an institution is to uphold morality and ethical standards of behavior. Since the influence of religion in the public domain diminished drastically, the foundations of morality seem to have rapidly deteriorated in modern societies, especially in the past century. Modern times also witnessed the unprecedented rise of atheism. Overall, the main dilemma of modernity appeared to be as follows – the more freedom humanity gains, the more mistakes it makes. In the end, freedom always entails the right to make wrong choices – otherwise it cancels itself. The question is – how to balance, in the best way, its positive and negative effects and consequences?

13. Julia Mitchell Corbett, *Religion in America*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), pp. 12-14.

Government's non-involvement with religion

The first aspect of the separation of Church and state refers to the equal treatment by government of all religions and its non-interference with religious beliefs (or the lack thereof) of the people. Bahá'í sacred texts explicitly, and on various occasions, support and promote those principles. In fact, they constitute some of the most important tenets of this spiritual tradition.

The Bahá'í Faith is the only religion that recognizes and accepts all major religious traditions of the world as valid and true. The animating spirit of this religion is the establishment of global unity of humankind, and such a unity is impossible without a fair and peaceful dialogue and cooperation among diverse spiritual paths. Hence, in "Glad-Tidings," for instance, the founder of the Faith Bahá'u'lláh says that "in this Most Great Revelation . . . the law of holy war hath been blotted out from the Book" and he appeals to his followers that they "[c]onsort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship."¹⁴ In *The Most Holy Book*, the mother-scripture of the Bahá'í revelation, Bahá'u'lláh permits Bahá'ís to marry people of other religions as well as unbelievers.¹⁵ In his many writings, he summons people to use religion as an instrument of unity and harmony rather than strife and discord. In "Ornaments," for instance, he writes:

The second Taráz is to consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship, [to] associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance . . . Blessed are such as hold fast to the cord of kindness and tender mercy and are free from animosity and hatred.¹⁶

The key social instruments for establishing such a state of affairs on a global scale are explicitly spelled out in Bahá'í scriptures as well. They include the equality of all under one law and the non-interference of government in the domain of human thought. In *Paris Talks*, for example, 'Abd'ul-Bahá, who succeeded his father Bahá'u'lláh as the leader of the new religious movement, said that "[a]ll prejudices, whether of religion, race, politics or nation must be renounced . . . All men are equal before the law, which must reign absolutely . . . there must be no favour shown

14. "Bishárát (Glad-Tidings)," *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. A Compilation* (New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1998), 1st ed. 1986, p. 208.

15. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-I-Aqdas. The Most Holy Book* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992), ¶ 139, Q84.

16. "Tarázát (Ornaments)," *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 216.

to individuals.”¹⁷ More specifically on religion, he emphasized that if it “becomes a cause of dislike, hatred and division, it were better to be without it, and to withdraw from such a religion would be a truly religious act . . . Any religion which is not a cause of love and unity is no religion.”¹⁸ In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, ‘Abd’ul-Bahá also refers to the freedom of religious expression: “When freedom of conscience, liberty of thought and right of speech prevail – that is to say, when every man according to his own idealization may give expression to his beliefs – development and growth are inevitable.”¹⁹

Religion’s non-involvement with government

The second element of the separation between religion and state refers to religion and its non-involvement with the government and its institutions. Modern political theory affirms that separation must be mutual, since the necessary prerequisite for the state’s non-interference with religion is religion’s non-involvement in politics itself; otherwise, it would suppress or persecute other sects. While formulating this program, modern thinkers may have had in mind the persecution of pagans by the Christians in the late Roman Empire or of their fellow Christians during the Middle Ages.

When it comes to this second aspect of separation of church and state, the teachings found in Bahá’í scriptures seem less clear and even ambiguous. On the one hand, in his epistles to the rulers of the world, for example, Bahá’u’lláh stresses that he has no intention of claiming power over their kingdoms. He contrasts the spiritual authority of the prophets to the worldly dominion of the rulers. This important theme runs throughout many of Bahá’u’lláh’s later writings as well. In the “Book of the Covenant,” he writes, for instance, “Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God . . . He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain.”²⁰ However, in another tablet, Bahá’u’lláh also says with respect to government that all “affairs are committed to the care of just kings and presidents and of the Trustees of the House of Justice.”²¹ He still maintains the separation between administration and worship within his own religion: “All matters of State should be referred to the

17. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, in *Writings and Utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (New Delhi, India: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2000), pp. 773, 777.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 764.

19. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, *ibid.*, p. 976.

20. “Kitáb-I-‘Ahd (Book of the Covenant),” *Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 325.

21. “Lawh-I-Dunyá (Tablet of the World),” *ibid.*, p. 250.

House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book.”²²

Similar statements are found in the utterances and writings of Bahá'u'lláh's successor 'Abd'ul-Bahá. In his early work *A Traveler's Narrative*, he writes, for instance, that the Bahá'í religion has “no worldly object nor any concern with political matters [and] is restricted to spiritual things and confined to matters of conscience; it has nothing to do with affairs of government nor any concern with the powers of the throne.”²³ He repeats in another place that, following “the command of the Blessed Perfection [Bahá'ís] refrained absolutely from interference in political matters [and] were not associated with any party.”²⁴ In his *Will and Testament*, however, while delineating the future responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice, the main governing body of the Bahá'í administration, 'Abd'ul-Bahá also states that “This House of Justice enacteth the laws and government enforceth them.”²⁵

How can one reconcile those seemingly contradictory statements? Taking the non-interference stance, one may come to a position close to that of Juan Cole who makes the Bahá'í Faith the religion of the Enlightenment. Then the question arises, for example, as to why modern believers would give preference to the Bahá'í over the Christian religion if in his social-political views Bahá'u'lláh could not offer anything more advanced than Thomas Jefferson? On the other hand, if inclined toward a theocratic model, one may share Samuel Wilson's concerns that Bahá'ís are covert politicians. Explicitly they swear to abstain from politics, but in reality they are just not willing to participate in liberal democratic government. Instead, they plan to transform the realm of politics peacefully through conversion so as to take over all power on a global scale. Both alternatives appear inadequate and not quite correspond to the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings. Since both democratic and theocratic tendencies are, indeed, present in the scriptural texts, one may suggest a more complex approach that harmonizes and forms a proper balance between both trends.

Religious vs. secular democracy

Generally speaking, there exist two opposite solutions to the organization of power. The first one is known as absolutism and in its extreme form, it combines spiritual and temporal authority in the hands of one person, usually a monarch. This political model was most common

22. “Ishráqát (Splendors),” *ibid.*, p. 272.

23. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *A Traveler's Narrative*, in *Writings and Utterances*, p. 115.

24. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abd'ul-Bahá*, *ibid.*, p. 454.

25. *Will and Testament of 'Abd'ul-Bahá*, *ibid.*, p. 684.

throughout human history. Ancient Egyptian pharaohs and Roman Emperors were the supreme rulers of their countries as well as the high priests of their respective religions. In the Middle Ages the ideal of absolutism remained unchallenged and even reinforced by the ultimate authority of the Pope who sought domination over the crown. Medieval attempt at theocracy was a unique example of absolutism *par excellence*, and it showed in the most clear and evident way all the dangers of such form of government with its characteristically high concentration of power in the hands of one person. The second and opposite social-political system was formulated and established in Modern times in the form of liberal multi-party democracy. It rejected absolutism, promoted human rights and freedoms, and was based on the division of the three branches of government and the separation of religion and state.

Bahá'í scriptures also unequivocally condemn absolutism as well as the tyranny that often accompanies it. In the epistle to the Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh commends the queen for having introduced the consultative assembly or the parliament into the British government. In his own religion, Bahá'u'lláh also advises in favor of the electability of the rulers and collective decision-making practices. It is of no surprise, therefore, that both he and 'Abd'ul-Bahá on various occasions speak favorably of democracy and Western civilization.

Everything is good in its proper degree, however, and Bahá'u'lláh warns his followers that too much freedom may harm people. "If carried to excess," he writes, "civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation."²⁶ Bahá'u'lláh sums up his approach in a condensed form in *The Most Holy Book*:

Liberty must, in the end, lead to sedition, whose flames none can quench . . . Know ye that the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal. That which beseemeth man is submission unto such restraints as will protect him from his own ignorance, and guard him against the harm of the mischief-maker. Liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station. It debaseth him to the level of extreme depravity and wickedness . . . We approve of liberty in certain circumstances, and refuse to sanction it in others.²⁷

As a result, in the domain of government Bahá'u'lláh favors moderate solutions that blend the democratic representation of the people with the

26. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 640.

27. *The Most Holy Book*, ¶ 123-124.

divine right and authority of the king. In “Glad Tidings” he points out, for instance:

Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof.²⁸

It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that Bahá'u'lláh's vision for the possible world government would also entail a blending of religious and secular authorities with checks and balances on both sides – a form that apparently has never been tried before in human history. Such a social-political system may be called “constitutional theocracy.” However, the term “theocracy” in this case is rather misleading because it usually presupposes unelected religious officials holding the absolute power in their own hands, like it was, for example, with medieval papacy. Hence, one might suggest in its stead a different term – “constitutional religious democracy” – which, in my judgment, describes with more precision and accuracy a unique and complex nature of this global vision.

It should be pointed out that whatever form, if any, the distribution of power between the Universal House of Justice and civil government may have been envisioned by the founders of the Bahá'í Faith to take place in the future, there always remains some degree of separation between the Bahá'í religion and state because of the distinction between canonical and civil law and their different spheres of application. Bahá'í ritual of marriage, for instance, refers only to Bahá'ís, as do the inheritance laws, burial practices, etc. The fines that are prescribed in *The Most Holy Book* for specific offences, such as adultery, for instance, will apply only to Bahá'ís as well since the Bahá'í Faith is an independent, self-sponsored religion and does not accept monetary contributions from non-members.

In addition, if Bahá'ís are successful in promulgating their teachings to the point of creating a truly global religion, the measure of responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice may also depend on the distribution of powers between the national governments and the global super-state. When addressing the issue of balancing local and central authorities, Bahá'í scriptures seem to favor decentralization. In *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* ‘Abdu'l-Bahá says, for instance, that:

. . . in the future there shall be no centralization in the countries of the world . . . each province will be independent in itself, but there will

28. “Bishárát (Glad-Tidings),” *Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 212.

be federal union protecting the interests of the various independent states . . . To cast aside centralization which promotes despotism is the exigency of the time.²⁹

Conclusion

Let me return, in conclusion, to my initial question of whether the Bahá'í religion does or does not support the principle of separation between church and state. As we have demonstrated in the previous analysis, neither a simple affirmation nor negation does justice to the complexity of the issue. Bahá'í scriptures definitely affirm some of the elements of separation while modifying its other aspects. Thus, in the Enlightenment thought, freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, for example, are declared as general philosophical principles that are put into practice through a mutual non-interference between religion and civil government. In the Bahá'í scriptures, the same principles are supported and promoted as part of religious ideology and Bahá'í institutions are seen as the guarantors of putting them into practice worldwide.

In other words, Bahá'í scriptural texts reaffirm in a different, religious context those elements of the Enlightenment ideology that constitute the very basis of a healthy society. This refers, first of all, to the elimination of tyranny and promotion of human rights such as freedom of conscience, freedom of expression, etc. At the same time, the Bahá'í writings are counteracting those aspects of the Enlightenment philosophy that seem to threaten the continuous progress of civilization. This, in its turn, relates primarily to irreligion or secularism and moral degradation as its consequence, as well as to all forms of divisiveness and conflicts within society, including religious, racial, national, political and economic divisions and inequality.

As for the distribution of power between the Universal House of Justice and secular government, it is not specified in the writings of the founders of the Bahá'í religion and, therefore, it is open to change and transformation throughout history. Let us not forget that the authority of Roman bishops – the future Catholic Popes – has dramatically increased since the fifth century when the Roman Empire fell to the barbarians and its civil government was no longer able to help and protect its citizens. The structure of the global super-state, if such a governmental structure arises, will also depend on the condition and capabilities of civil authorities on a planetary scale. As a general principle, the more the divisiveness of the people in the world increases, the more centralized form of government they will need. And, on the contrary, the stronger the moral val-

29. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, in *Writings and Utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, pp. 948-49.

ues and the more united people are, the more decentralized such a global government will become. No matter what the circumstances may hold in the future, the main responsibilities of the Universal House of Justice are explicitly set in *The Most Holy Book*. They concern education, promotion of faith and charitable causes – “Verily have We made it a shelter for the poor and needy.”³⁰

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30. *The Most Holy Book*, ¶ 48.