

H-Baha'i message from Juan

Contributed by Alison Marshall
Tuesday, 06 December 2005
Last Updated Saturday, 03 June 2006

Below is a message that Juan Cole has posted to the discussion list H-Baha'i.

It is about the recent disenrollment of Sen. Juan talks about how the Baha'i community is becoming a faith community that is based around doctrine. The two doctrines that Juan cites as now being requirements for Baha'i membership are:

- the absolute infallibility of the House of Justice. I was disenrolled for arguing against this.
- that the Baha'i institutions will one day take over the civil ones (a theocracy). Sen was disenrolled for arguing against this.

I would also add the doctrine that women will never serve on the House. Michael McKenny was disenrolled for arguing against this.

Alison

Date: Mon, 05 Dec 2005 16:02:31 +0000

Subject: disenrollment and the New Orthodoxy

To: H-BAHAI

As a historian of religion, I would argue that the disenrollment of Sen McGlenn is another in a series of signs that the Baha'i Faith is becoming a church in the Weberian sense, bound together by doctrinal considerations rather than informal enthusiasm (as was often the case in the 1960s and 1970s).

The two doctrines, departing from which has resulted in sanctions, are the absolute infallibility of the Universal House of Justice and its future role at the head of a global theocracy wherein Baha'i administrative institutions will also form the civil government. I know that Baha'i readers will object that Shoghi Effendi expressed reservations about the phrase "theocracy," but I would argue that the doctrine of theocracy now being imposed from Haifa is anyway incompatible with the plain texts of the holy figures. So I am using the word as a social science term, since social scientists would typically consider the assertion that religious institutions will exercise temporal rule a form of theocracy.

The doctrine of the infallibility of the Universal House of Justice has evolved radically in recent decades. Abdu'l-Baha called the institution ma`sum or "guarded from sin by God," but said its `ismat was derivative, which certainly makes it sound not very strong, and far from absolute. And, of course, he had also expressed the hope in The Secret of Divine Civilization that the Iranian cabinet would prove "ma`sum," or protected by God from making big errors. Orally, he denied his own infallibility. So he did not mean by the term anything approaching "absolute infallibility." Once a body calling itself the Universal House of Justice was actually elected, at a time when the original plans for the structure of the religion, found in the writings of the holy figures, had clearly fallen through, there was a natural tendency for that body and its appointees and clients to put very strong emphasis on infallibility. It is a way of asserting leadership of a disparate community. They developed the doctrine into one of absolute infallibility. This process is a form of the iron law of bureaucracy, wherein entrenched elites inevitably have far more power over time to shape things than rank and file "citizens." The absolute infallibility of the Universal House of Justice is an implicit, assumed belief, and for those who uphold it, it is one of the things that define being a Baha'i.

The doctrine of theocracy is mysterious in its origins, though Sen McGlinn has given many clues as to its development in the Western communities. It certainly directly contradicts the position of the Baha'i holy figures. Precisely because it is contrary to the scriptural texts, policing this doctrine is all the more crucial for those who believe in it (and who have somehow managed to make believing in it a criterion for rising high in the religion). Otherwise, as a doctrine it is volatile and unstable, constantly in danger of deconstructing itself. Actually, insofar as the most great infallibility was reserved by Baha'u'llah for the Manifestations of God, the absolute infallibility of the Universal House of Justice is likewise not scriptural. (And since Baha'is have to live every day with numerous errors made by that body, it is also contrary to common sense). It, too, is an unstable doctrine and so must be imposed zealously if it is to survive.

The adherents of absolute infallibility and of theocracy are reluctant to promulgate these ideas as a formal orthodoxy to be affirmed, e.g., in a catechism. They certainly would like to do so. But they tend to treat the New Orthodoxy (they would deny it is new) as a goal toward which they want to take the community, gradually and over time. In many ways, this Orthodoxy is often a secret from the rank and file, and many Baha'is only encounter it if they move high up in the administration. When the doctrine of theocracy was first discussed on the old talisman@indiana.edu in the mid-1990s, many posters remarked that they had never encountered it and certainly did not believe in it.

All of the Baha'i scholars and intellectuals who have been threatened, harassed or sanctioned by the Baha'i administration since the late 1970s have been guilty of publicly disputing one of these two doctrines. Since the high administrators believe that these two doctrines define Baha'i orthodoxy and legitimate membership in the community, an open, public, and vocal challenge to them is almost always met with sanctions. The Baha'i administration is well aware that most Baha'is probably have not yet accepted these two doctrines, but is willing to chalk this phenomenon up to the immaturity of the believers. They are not sanctioned because they are not writers, and have no particular influence, and are not so much opposed to the New Orthodoxy as they are just not convinced of it.

The sociological mechanisms whereby Baha'i administrators and intellectuals throughout the world are inducted behind the scenes into this two-fold New Orthodoxy are unclear and need investigation. Many of the signals given by high administrators lack explicitness.

So, it is clear that the Universal House of Justice has called upon members of the National Spiritual Assemblies throughout the world (is that 1100 persons or so?) to refute Sen McGlinn's book, a powerful signal that they must uphold the doctrine of theocracy. It is also clear that removal of McGlinn from membership in the community is a form of excommunication or takfir (takfir is simply saying that someone who considers himself or herself a believer is not actually a believer, because of some essential deficit). And the basis for the takfir is his public refutation of the key doctrine of Theocracy.

Doctrinally-based churches, such as Roman Catholicism, always impose sanctions on believers who publicly reject key doctrines. This move is necessary in part to protect the doctrines themselves, since sanctioning an author brands his or her work with a sort of taboo, making the work less likely to prove able to challenge the Orthodox doctrine within a community eager to stay on the right side of orthodoxy. The Baha'i faith has simply become such a doctrinally-based church. Since so many rank and file believers came in via the old "sect-like" route of popular enthusiasm, the administrative Church above presides unevenly over the remnants of the Sect (in the technical sense) below.

That is why the New Orthodoxy must remain a secret orthodoxy, but must nevertheless be policed, putting the "heretics" in the Kafkaesque position of not knowing exactly why they have been sanctioned. The "doctrine" may not be named as such, the "heresy" may also not be named, and even the sanction, of excommunication of various sorts, may not be called that, either. Naming these things would signal to the rank and file that their administration had become a doctrinal church, of a sort many of them joined the Baha'i faith to get away from.

cheers

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