

Abdu'l-Baha says that, in the future, the House of Justice will have a 'general function.' What does this mean?

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To: XX, TARJUMAN-LIST@LISTSERV.BUFFALO.EDU  
Subject: Re: General functions of the Universal House of Justice

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On 27 Mar 2007 at 12:28, XX wrote:

- > In this quotation, `Abdu'l-Baha is contrasting a present situation
- > (the Spiritual Assembly where the body concerned is rawhaanii and
- > not siyaasii) with a future situation (the House of Justice where
- > the body concerned combines -jaami` - rawhani and siyasi functions).
- >
- > If we were to take the translation of siyasi favoured by your self
- > and Cole, and say that siyasi refers only to administrative
- > sanctions within the Baha'i community, then that would make a
- > nonsense out of the above quotation - since the Spiritual Assembly
- > already has the power of administrative sanctions within the Baha'i
- > community. The word siyasi must logically refer to something that
- > the Spiritual Assembly does not possess at present and, `Abdu'l-Baha
- > says, it will possess in the future. The only meaning of siyasi that
- > would apply would be the meaning "political".

The meaning you suggest does not appear in your own translation, which reads:

"The Hands of the Cause of God should be permanent members of this Spiritual Assembly for this is a spiritual assembly and not a political [siyasi] one . . . But whenever the House of Justice is established all of its members will be by general election for the House of Justice has general functions." (‘Ala’i, Mu’assisih Ayadi Amru’llah pp. 435-6n.)

The "present" situation in the tablet is that this is an unelected assembly, and therefore without administrative powers. The Hands of the Cause can therefore be members. But when the House is properly elected and gains the siyasi power, the Hands should not be members, because Baha'u'llah's intention was that the Bahai community -- unlike the situation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam -- should not be run

by religious experts but rather by an elected body of laymen.

There is no need to bring a reference to government politics into the picture here (Occam's razor), and every reason not to. Abdu'l-Baha after all encouraged the Iranian friends to elect Hands of the Cause to the Majlis, so why would he say that an assembly with Hands cannot have the power of political siyasi, and an assembly with political siyasi cannot have Hands?

No - the siyasi here is clearly an administrative power in the Bahai community, as Ali Kuli Khan translated it in the eighth Ishraqat. The "general election" and "general functions" refer to all the members of the Bahai community being involved in the election, because its decisions (functions) will then affect all the members. The Hands cannot serve in this siyasi function in the Assembly/House of Justice, which makes them particularly eligible to serve in the political arm of government.

This is consistent and reasonable, and I argue that a translation of any particular tablet should be consistent with other tablets, especially those from the same period. The translator cannot simply use a dictionary definition of a term: he must place each document at least in the context of the author's system of ideas, his basic beliefs, and assume that these will not change from moment to moment (except where the author is someone who says different things to different people, such as Afghani).

> Thus the quotation you have cited to Salman beginning: "The  
> signature of that meeting should be the Spiritual Gathering (House  
> of Spirituality) and the wisdom therein is that hereafter the  
> government should not infer from the term "House of Justice" that a  
> court is signified, that it is connected with political affairs,  
> ..." merely confirms this point - that for the present Baha'i  
> Spiritual Assemblies must refrain from political involvement but in  
> the future, Baha'i Houses of Justice will have a political function.

I will quote it again, and suggest you read it carefully

"The signature of that meeting should be the Spiritual Gathering (House of Spirituality) and the wisdom therein is that hereafter the government should not infer from the term "House of Justice" that a court is signified, that it is connected with political affairs, or that at any time it will interfere with governmental

affairs. Hereafter, enemies will be many. They would use this subject as a cause for disturbing the mind of the government and confusing the thoughts of the public. The intention was to make known that by the term Spiritual Gathering (House of Spirituality), that Gathering has not the least connection with material matters, and that its whole aim and consultation is confined to matters connected with spiritual affairs. This was also instructed (performed) in all Persia."

This is printed in Tablets of Abdu'l-Baha Abbas vol. 1, page 5. Abdu'l-Baha's explicit position here is that the House of Justice is not connected with political affairs and will not "at any time" interfere in government affairs, and he changes the name to spiritual assembly, temporarily, to make this fact clear to the governments. But you read an implicit position behind it, saying more or less the opposite -- that the House of Justice \*will\* take over political affairs, and the change of name is then a temporary subterfuge to disguise this intention from the government. But how is it that you know this is the real intention? It is not there in the text, or anywhere else in the Writings.

> >On Bahai lists, the argument always turns circular: convinced  
> >theocratists

I am sorry, I did not mean to use a pejorative. Let us say there are pro-x and anti-x approaches to reading the Writings as a whole, which are much more comprehensive than just the translation of a particular word, and these approaches fall into the two categories which Beyer describes, of welcoming change and becoming at home in the changing world, or resisting change and making the religious community a safe house away from the world. There is not much gradation of world-views between the two extremes because the demands of internal consistency within a person's own beliefs moves them to one or other position over time. That polarisation then means that the positions are given names. The pro-x people also have terms for the anti-x people (such as me): "modern liberals" and "postmodern relativists" are two that come to mind. I don't take them as pejoratives, nor do I take this 'naming' as saying that the Bahai community is divided into opposing camps. The polarisation comes about because one position, or the other, can be made internally consistent but a half-way compromise would be inconsistent. So what people are saying when they call me a liberal or the like, is that my reading of more or less everything - not just religion - is done within a whole world-view that they cannot share.

It is a little like your characterisation of fundamentalism as a cognitive style (but I think that cognitive styles do come in gradations). If the Bahai Faith is indeed a 'world religion' it should make sense within various world views, so pro-x and anti-x people should be able to make one community.

- > In this and the other quotations that you have given in response to
- > Salman you have conflated two separate issues:
- >
- > 1. The ruling by Baha'u'llah, `Abdu'l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi that
- > individual Baha'is and the Spiritual Assemblies should not involve
- > themselves in the political maelstrom of today's world.

I think you inserted "today" here. This principle is not only stated repeatedly, it is coupled with various phrases that say it can never be changed:

The one true God, exalted be His glory, 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. From the beginning that hath no beginning (Lawh-e Ashraf, in Gleanings, CII 206-7)

- > 2. The eventual situation foreseen by Baha'u'llah, `Abdu'l-Baha and
- > Shoghi Effendi in which Baha'u'llah's teaching will be recognised as
- > the solution to the world's problems and the Houses of Justice
- > (which is what the Spiritual Assemblies will have evolved into by
- > then) will have political functions.

But there are explicit scriptures that say the Houses of Justice are not "connected with political affairs, and will not **\*\*at any time\*\*** interfere with governmental affairs." (to quote one example, from the tablet above). There are numerous such verses. What you are claiming is that the scriptures as a whole do not present the real Bahai teachings, but only an interim situation to be later replaced with the real teachings - which you know. But how do you know them? How are they transmitted? How are the countless contrary scriptures to be explained, if not as a huge deception? You can make an internally consistent picture of the Bahai teachings along these lines, but can you make it consistent with the scriptures?

- > I agree that the precise details of the institutions of the future
- > cannot be fully worked out from the writings of Shoghi Effendi. It
- > may be that some of the institutions that he refers to are merely
- > temporary institutions

Temporary? Perhaps - but (a) a new Manifestation would be required to over-rule the Guardian, abolish the institutions he has mandated "once for all" (WOB 202-3), and allow the thing he has forbidden "under any circumstances" (WOB 66), and (b) I think the principle is one of the eternal truths taught in all religions which can never be changed. Baha'u'llah has linked it to the biblical verse "Render unto Caesar" (in Epistle to the Son of the Wolf) and in the Aqdas says that the monarchs are the emblems of God's sovereignty "for all time." Abdu'l-Baha writes:

... matters of politics and government, of the kingdom and of subjects have a specified source and a respected place to which they refer, while guidance, religion, insight, education, and the promotion of the morals and virtues of humanity have a sacred centre and designated spring. These souls have nothing to do with political affairs, nor do they seek any involvement.

Now, in this most great cycle, when the world has reached the age of discretion and maturity, this matter has been made indisputable in the book of God ... The indisputable command is this:

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 ..

This shows what a mighty task you have to defend your translation: it goes against a principle that Baha'u'llah says is preserved from annulment, and which the Master has specifically interpreted here (in the Risaleh-ye Siyasiyyah) as relating to the separation of the religious and political spheres, and which is found not only in Bahai scriptures, but also in the hadith and Quran and in the New Testament.

Abdu'l-Baha writes:

The royal throne is encompassed with divine confirmations, and the royal crown is adorned with the gems of heavenly bounty. In the Quran it is clearly written, "Say: O God, Lord of sovereignty, you grant sovereignty to whoever you will, and you take it from whoever you please." Therefore, it is clear and evident that this bestowal is a divine gift and a favour from the Lord. Likewise, it is clearly said in an authentic tradition that "The king is the shadow of God on earth." Given the existence of these texts, which are like a solid foundation, any other talk, of the king being "an usurper who imposes" is obviously futile speculation and sheer imagination without argument or proof.

and he cites Baha'u'llah, where Baha'u'llah cites and endorses "Render unto Caesar" (Matt 22: 15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20: 20-26) in the Epistle to the Son of the Wolf pp 89-91. In ESW, Baha'u'llah also cites two verses from Paul " ... the powers that be are ordained of God," and "For he [the ruler] is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil." and another from the Quran: "Obey God and obey the Apostle, and those among you invested with authority."

> Best wishes  
> XX

Best wishes to you too XX, in all sincerity. I am sure I could never live in your world, and I suspect you can never understand mine, but we are parts of one body

Sen