

To an outsider, or a newcomer from Roman Catholicism, the Bahai community can look rather closed little club: only registered members can go to Feast and serve on Assemblies, there are ID cards for members (in some countries), and some Bahais (like me) are not allowed to be registered members. In fact, it's not so simple: there is more to the Bahai model of community than just membership lists.

---

To: XX,talisman9@yahoogroups.com  
Subject: Hello from a newbie  
Date sent: Tue, 06 Feb 2007 14:35:56 +0100

---

> If I were an unknown quantity, I'd simply go up to receive  
> Communion, or tell people I was Catholic, and nobody'd really know  
> better unless they knew me from childhood

The Bahai community does have such open institutions, open to everyone. One is the Mashriqu'l-Adhkar or "house" of worship (it is an institution, and despite the name does not need to have a building, any more than the House of Justice has to have a 'house'). The House of Worship does worship and nothing else - no doctrine, no administration - so its meetings are open to people of any faith or none, including CBs as far as I know. Its doors are supposed to be open to all, and I don't see how they could be closed selectively to some (like the shrines and gardens in Israel: there's no-one at the gates checking membership, and tour groups and school groups come and go during the public open hours). So that part of the Faith is like the RC church, but even more open: there is not even an expectation or honour system that only community members will "take communion" or its equivalent. Then there's the Association of Bahai Studies, which is open to all, but getting to participate by giving a paper etc is in theory merit-based. That's not working out too well in practice, but in principle that's how it should work.

But suppose the RC church also allowed you to vote for who would be the parish priest next year. You can bet they'd suddenly get strict about membership definitions. If you empower the people on the pews, you have to get serious about who is a member for the purpose. (Once upon a time Christian congregations did vote for their bishops, but that is early church history).

So you have some organs of the Bahai Faith that are open and inclusive, and others that are elitist (recognition by merit) or administrative (recognition by the say-so of the LSA and ultimately the UHJ). I fell out of the boat, as the Dutch say: the UHJ removed me from membership because I said in an academic publication "I should declare at the outset that my stance is not that of a historian or academic scholar of the science of religion, but of a Bahai theologian, writing from and for a religious community, and I speak as if the reader shares the concerns of that community." The UHJ thought that a theologian was some sort of priest, and kicked me out! Nevertheless, I support the system of having defined memberships for some Bahai institutions. Naturally there are some community members who are not really Bahais, and there are true Bahais who are not accepted as members. That's inevitable since membership is an outward, administrative, either-or thing, while belief and commitment is inward, spiritual, and comes in all the shades of grey. A degree of mismatch around the edges is inevitable, and I'd rather have a fairly arbitrary system than one in which there are court hearings to determine how much of a "true believer" a person is. So long as not being a member of the community is not too terrible (the other parts of the Bahai faith are still open), and not too many mismatches happen, it's as good a system as any I can think of. Try coming up with a better way of doing things yourself. As Churchill said about democracy ...

The crucial thing that makes this work for the Bahais, where it would be impossible for the RC church, is that there is not one "church" that theoretically embraces every function, rather there are multiple organs that each have their own function. So I am out of the local administrative community, meaning i can't vote etc., but I still go to deepenings, I do Bahai studies in various groups, I would go to the mashriq for worship except that the meetings have fizzled out at the moment. If I had trouble with my local Mashriq meeting because I like gregorian and they do jazz, I could still be in the local administrative meeting: no schisms over liturgies here. You can't be refused communion or lose your teaching licence because you don't see eye to eye with the Curia.

The multi-organic community structure makes the Bahai Faith look like a postmodern society, whereas the RC church looks like an old-time centralised monarchy, or a 'modern' society of the democratic-centrist type. In theory it's untidy but should preserve unity while allowing vigour. Unfortunately our postmodern community is inhabited

largely by modernists or medievalists who really want a centralised hierarchical structure, and keep trying to turn the Bahai community into a sort of church with the UHJ as curia and the ruhi supervisor grade 7 as parish priest, and all the rest as congregation, safe and secure in a world where everything is clearcut. Their community is a refuge from the world rather than the cutting edge of progress. In the nature of things, the conservative mentality cannot be productive, it can at most slow things down a bit and give people time to adapt to the really radical idea of religious community that Abdu'l-Baha taught.

The poet S.T. Coleridge wrote a slim book called "church and state" (1831) in which he discusses the difference between the church of Christ and the church as it is established in the world, recognising the value of the latter but also recognising that it is not the true church of the Gospels. You might find it in a university or seminary library

Sen