CHAPTER 4

Principles of Bahá’í Organization

Interpretation vs. Administration

The Bahá’í organization, called the Administrative Order, serves as the instrument that carries out the Bahá’í teachings and promotes and protects the faith. Its structure, responsibilities, and sources of income were outlined in the tablets of Bahá’u’lláh and later expanded and clarified in the writings of his successors as the leaders of the new religious movement—his eldest son ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and his great grandson Shoghi Effendi. The “Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” is especially important in this respect since it formulates the main features of the Administrative Order as it exists today and is accepted by virtually all Bahá’ís.

Since the inception of the Bahá’í Faith in the West at the turn of the twentieth century the Administrative Order and its organizational patterns proved to become the source of many splits and controversies within the Bahá’í community. Beginning with Ruth White who argued that the Bahá’í cause of global unity and peace could not be formally organized, some Bahá’ís challenged the legitimacy of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “Will and Testament” and initiated a movement of the so-called “free Bahá’ís.” In the second half of the century another, and more serious, controversy occurred in connection with the position of the Guardian of the Faith established in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “Will and Testament,” which led to the appearance of various splinter groups of “orthodox Bahá’ís.”

By the end of the century several dissident Bahá’ís had challenged some other features of the Administrative Order. Such scholars as Juan Cole and Sen McGlinn have insisted on the permanent separation of Bahá’í religious institutions from secular government while Alison Marshall has questioned the notion of infallibility of the Universal House of Justice. Finally, in the beginning of the twenty-first century Fredrick Glaysher has challenged the Bahá’í stance toward organized dissent and formed his own splinter group of “Reform Bahá’ís.”

A comprehensive scholarly history of alternative Bahá’í groups has not yet been written, and I will not dwell on this topic further. Instead I will focus on the Administrative Order itself and its characteristic features, which are as follows: (1) hereditary Guardianship; (2) elected bodies or Houses of Justice; (3) the principle of infallibility; (4) the prohibition of organized dissent and covenant-breaking; and finally (5) the blending of religion and state—theocratic vision.
Guardianship

Every religion has three elements that constitute the power of its system—the interpretation of sacred texts, the administration of legal matters, and the observance of prescribed rituals. In some religious traditions those functions are not clearly differentiated; in others they are combined into one office. The Pope as the head of the Catholic Church, for instance, is the highest authority in matters of interpretation, canonical legislation, and worship.

As far as I know, the Bahá’í Faith is the first sacred tradition that introduced the modern principle of separation or distribution of powers into the domain of religious affairs. And the Bahá’í scriptures are the only sacred texts in the world thus far that explicitly speak of the separation of interpretation, administration, and worship. In “Glad Tidings” Bahá’u’lláh distinguishes between worship and the affairs of the community and the state when he writes: “All matters of State should be referred to the House of Justice, but acts of worship must be observed according to that which God hath revealed in His Book” (Bahá’u’lláh, Writings, 1998 212). In The Most Holy Book he prescribes the erection of the Houses of Worship, or Mashriqu’l-Adhkár, in which sermons and the use of pulpits are prohibited and only the words of the Holy Scriptures may be read (The Most Holy Book, pghs. 115 and 154).

In addition, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in his “Will and Testament,” distinguishes between the matters of interpretation and administration when he establishes the Office of the Guardian of the Faith and outlines its duties and responsibilities. “After the passing away of this wronged one,” he writes, “it is incumbent upon the [believers] to turn unto Shoghi Effendi...as he is...the guardian of the Cause of God...He is the expounder of the words of God and after him will succeed the first-born of his lineal descendents” (681). The interpretive function that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assigns to the Office of the Guardian is of such importance that he emphasizes several times the unique position of this person within the faith. “It is incumbent upon the members of the House of Justice, upon all” believers, he points out, “to show their obedience, submissiveness and subordination unto the guardian of the Cause of God.” He warns again: whoever “opposeth him hath opposed the True One, will make a breach in the Cause of God, will subvert His Word and will become a manifestation of the Center of Sedition” (681).

The separation of powers between the interpretive Office of the Guardian and the administrative body of the House of Justice is not absolute though and has some qualifications. It resembles the relation between the principles of Yin and Yang in Chinese thought. It is well known that the Yin-Yang symbolism involves three factors. Yin and Yang are two opposite forces that are interlaced with each other and together form a unity of duality. Likewise, the interpretive