

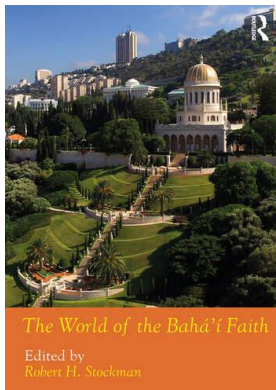
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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The Covenant and Covenant-Breaking

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THE COVENANT AND
COVENANT-BREAKING*Wendy M. Heller*

To understand the world of the Bahá'í Faith—its teachings, community, institutions, and culture, and most importantly, its ethos and the nature of the society it aims to create—is impossible without appreciating the role of the Covenant. The Covenant figures in every aspect of Bahá'í life. It defines the individual's relationship and obligations to God and to other human beings and provides a vision of society that owes its character and its cohesive power to a shared transcendent bond. The Bahá'í Writings confirm the same general covenantal account of human nature and purpose found in the scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The covenant narrative is the basis of the Bahá'í worldview and is regarded as the core eternal spiritual truth that links all the revealed religions—past, present, and future—as sequential dispensations of one eternal faith. A specific covenant Bahá'u'lláh made with His followers preserves doctrinal integrity and social unity within the religion, preventing schism.

A covenant, as a solemn agreement between two parties, is a phenomenon that comes into being, has meaning, and exerts its power to bind conscience, and thus motivate human behaviour, as it is lived through intentional actions performed in language, or *speech acts*. The Covenant is entered into by a speech act, and it is adhered to and violated through speech acts.¹ This chapter will explore the nature, purpose, and implications of the Covenant in the Bahá'í Faith, with particular attention to their rhetorical dimensions, in the sense in which *rhetoric* is 'the study of the ways in which character and community—and motive, value, reason, social structure, everything, in short, that makes a culture—are defined and made real in performances of language' (White 1984: ix). For it is the Covenant that defines the norms and practices that shape the discourse, and thus the world, of the Bahá'í Faith.

The Greater Covenant

Covenanting belongs to the class of speech acts called 'commissives', which 'commit the speaker to a certain course of action' (Austin 1975: 157). As understood by Bahá'ís,

a Covenant in the religious sense is a binding agreement between God and man, whereby God requires of man certain behaviour in return for which He guarantees

certain blessings, or whereby He gives man certain bounties in return for which He takes from those who accept them an undertaking to behave in a certain way.

(Universal House of Justice, in Research Department 2021: 61.1)

The principle of proportional recompense, or reward and punishment, is a component of the Covenant in all its historical forms: obedience to a covenant attracts divine blessings, while disobedience incurs their withdrawal, or divine retribution. One way in which this dynamic operates is as a process of cause and effect. The inner, spiritual life of the people shapes their social world: if they follow the divine laws and exemplify the divine virtues in their interactions with others, that fact will be reflected in their character and that of their society.

Several intrinsically related covenants are mentioned in the Bahá'í Writings. The soul becomes a party to a covenant with God (sometimes referred to as the Eternal Covenant) by receiving the gift of life, and particularly 'the gift of understanding' (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 95.1). The individual has a sacred obligation to use those gifts for the purpose intended by the Giver, which is to fulfil the duties described in verse 1 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas: to recognize God, by accepting the messenger, or 'Manifestation', of God for one's day, and to obey His ordinances. The collective purpose of human existence is to 'carry forward an ever-advancing civilization' and 'to ensure the peace and tranquillity of mankind, and provide all the means by which they can be established' (*Gleanings*, 109.2, 34.5). The ideal society thus is one that provides the material, social, and spiritual conditions in which individuals can flourish and attain the purpose of their existence, even as it reflects that flourishing in the qualities that characterize the patterns of life that constitute its culture.

Individual and collective purposes merge in the Greater Covenant, which supplies the dynamic of spiritual and social evolution. Through the successive dispensations of revelation brought to humanity by the founders of religion, civilization advances in stages of increasing social integration. The expanding scope of unity is made possible because religion transcends the limitations of all other sources of collective identity and allegiance—such as tribe, race, class, nation, or ethnicity—in being able to unite formerly separate, hostile groups into a single moral community.

Through its renewal in each age, this covenant is the instrument of transition from one dispensation of revelation to the next. In the words of the Báb (alluding to Qur'an 3:81):

The Lord of the universe hath never raised up a prophet nor hath He sent down a Book unless He hath established His covenant with all men, calling for their acceptance of the next Revelation and of the next Book.

(*Selections* 6.16)

The Greater Covenant is thus the mainspring of progressive revelation (q.v.), mediating both continuity and change: eternal spiritual truths are reaffirmed in each dispensation, while social laws are changed to meet the needs of the emerging stage of collective spiritual and moral development.

The Lesser Covenant

The Lesser Covenant is the covenant of succession that the founder of a religion makes with His followers for the continuation of authority within the religion after His death. Historically, covenants of succession were unwritten and implicit, conveyed as brief oral statements such as Jesus' designation of Peter as His successor in Matt. 16:18 and Muhammad's appointment of

‘Alí ibn Abí-Ṭálib at Ghadír Khumm. But none of those covenants included explicit provisions for the institutionalization of authority that would have made them robust enough to preserve the unity of the religion when put to the ultimate test. The historical consequences of that fact were schism and perennial, often violent, conflict. In a letter written in 1930 Shoghi Effendi observed that

the fundamental reason why the unity of the Church of Christ was irretrievably shattered . . . was that the Edifice which the Fathers of the Church reared after the passing of His First Apostle was an Edifice that rested in nowise upon the explicit directions of Christ Himself. The authority and features of their administration were wholly inferred, and indirectly derived, with more or less justification, from certain vague and fragmentary references which they found scattered amongst His utterances as recorded in the Gospel.

He concluded that, when faced by the challenges later raised (in the Protestant Reformation),

Had it been possible for the Church Fathers . . . to cite specific utterances of Christ regarding the future administration of His Church, or the nature of the authority of His Successors, they would surely have been capable of quenching the flame of controversy, and preserving the unity of Christendom.

(The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh)

The absence of a detailed, written covenant of succession, and the historical consequences of that absence, have tacitly shaped the Western conceptual frame used to talk about religion. No category exists in that frame for anything like the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Instead, it is assumed that the absence of such a covenant is a universal characteristic of religion, and therefore that the authority of religious institutions is always contestable, doctrinal questions are fundamentally unresolvable, and, in the final analysis, disunity and conflict are inevitable as they stem from a condition inherent in religion itself.

The covenant of succession in the Bahá'í Faith departs radically from that historical pattern and puts all those assumptions into question. Written by the hand of the author, in documents that are part of the sacred scripture, the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh constitutes a foundational charter for His religion and, as such, has no precedent in religious history. Its implications shape the Bahá'í Faith in ways that make the religion markedly different from others. To attempt to understand, or even to describe, the Bahá'í Faith without taking this fact into account is to approach the subject in much the same way that early English grammarians tried to describe the English language by forcing it into the grammatical categories of Latin—the only model they knew—and in the process entirely missing the real categories, and misunderstanding the nature, of English grammar.

The key documents of this covenant are Bahá'u'lláh's Kitáb-i-Aqdas and Kitáb-i-'Ahd (Book of the Covenant), and 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas Bahá'u'lláh indicates 'Abdu'l-Bahá as His successor and the interpreter of His teachings and ordains the institution of the House of Justice; He confirms the appointment of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Kitáb-i-'Ahd. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in His Will and Testament, names Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Faith and elaborates on the election and authority of the Universal House of Justice. In addition to fixing the succession of leadership and the sources of interpretive authority, these documents create the Bahá'í administrative institutions and define their functions, prerogatives, and authority (see the chapter 'Overview: The Central Figures, the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith, and

the Covenant'). In doing so, the Covenant also implements another fundamental departure: it abolishes the priesthood.²

Shoghi Effendi, describing the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, states that it is in that book that Bahá'u'lláh 'abolishes the institution of priesthood' (*God Passes By* 214). But while the Aqdas explicitly prohibits certain practices associated with the clergy (including monasticism, the confession of sins, the use of pulpits, and the kissing of hands), it is the establishment, in that book, of the provisions of the Covenant that abolishes the clergy *as an institution*—by assigning its traditional executive and epistemic functions elsewhere. Because membership on the Bahá'í administrative institutions (Spiritual Assemblies and the Universal House of Justice) is by democratic election, and all forms of electioneering are prohibited, there is no legitimate way for anyone to pursue an ambition to leadership, or even a profession, in an administrative position, that is, to be 'in authority'. And as interpretive and legislative authority are unavailable to individuals, there is no way to gain privileged status for one's personal interpretations or views, that is, to be 'an authority'.³

Interpretive and epistemic authority in the Bahá'í Faith

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the perennial bane of religion, and prime cause of religious strife, has been the alteration, over time, of the original teachings of the founders of religion through the introduction of interpretations, dogmas, and practices that are human and therefore fallible.⁴ To prevent that from happening in the Bahá'í Faith, the documents of the Covenant restrict authority to two sources. The first is 'the Book', comprising the corpus—amounting to approximately seven million words—of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and, by extension, the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi. As the 'living mouth of the Book', the interpreter alone 'can authoritatively state what the Book means' (Universal House of Justice, in Research Department 2021: 59.15). Their interpretations are binding and cannot be set aside. When an authoritative interpretation exists for a statement in Bahá'u'lláh's writings—such as 'Abdu'l-Bahá's interpretation (confirmed by Shoghi Effendi) that verse 63 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, which, when read literally, appears to permit bigamy, actually requires monogamy—the logic of authoritative interpretation excludes as invalid any argument that would set aside that interpretation in favour of a literal reading of the verse.

The other source of binding authority is the Universal House of Justice, which 'deliberate[s] upon all problems which have caused difference, questions that are obscure, and matters that are not expressly recorded in the Book' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament). The Book cannot be changed or added to, but the House of Justice can abrogate or change its own legislation. The distinction between authoritative interpretation and the legislative function, including elucidations and administrative decisions, of the Universal House of Justice is that the House of Justice 'does not attempt to say what the revealed Word means—it states what must be done in cases where the revealed Text or its authoritative interpretation is not explicit' (Research Department 2021: 65.4).

To determine 'what must be done', the House of Justice can both endorse deductions from the Book that are valid and rule out those that are invalid and contradict the Book. 'Abdu'l-Bahá in fact redefines 'heresy' (*bid'at*) as 'such matters as are not ordained in the explicit text of the Book and which the Universal House of Justice doth not endorse' (in Research Department 2021: 18.1). Some matters are unspecified in the Book, but individuals are free to come to their own understandings about them. On such topics, personal views are not permitted to be 'imposed on others, nor so promoted as to crystallize into doctrines not found in the explicit Text' (Universal House of Justice, in Research Department 2021: 77.4). Thus there can be no 'schools' of Bahá'í theology; in fact, the term 'theology' does not sit well with Bahá'ís in the

sense that evokes the traditional practice of theologians defining and elaborating doctrines to shape the beliefs of a laity:

Collateral with His summons to the pursuit of knowledge, Bahá'u'lláh has abolished entirely that feature of all past religions by which a special caste of persons such as the Christian priesthood or the Islamic 'ulamá came to exercise authority over the religious understanding and practice of their fellow believers. In a letter written in Persian on his behalf to the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Istanbul, the Guardian is at some pains to underline the importance of this marked departure from past religious history: 'But praise be to God that the Pen of Glory has done away with the unyielding and dictatorial views of the learned and the wise, dismissed the assertions of individuals as an authoritative criterion, even though they were recognized as the most accomplished and learned among men, and ordained that all matters be referred to authorized centres and specified assemblies.'

(Universal House of Justice, in Research Department 2021: 71.4)

In a passage supplementary to the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh states that the members of the Universal House of Justice are collectively 'the recipients of divine inspiration' and that '[i]t is incumbent upon all to be obedient unto them' (*Ishráqát*, in *Tablets*). 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in His Will, affirms that the Universal House of Justice is 'freed from all error', that '[w]hatsoever they decide is of God' and 'has the same effect as the Text itself'. The specific sense of infallibility that applies to the House of Justice does not include or even require omniscience, as their deliberation is not reducible to a rational calculus; 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the House of Justice would not take decisions 'according to its own concepts and opinions' but 'through the inspiration and confirmation of the Holy Spirit' (in Research Department 2021: 19.2). Bahá'ís are advised to avoid a narrow literalism in their efforts to understand the concept; in a broad sense, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement can be understood as a guarantee that in matters of doctrine the House of Justice will not allow Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to be corrupted by human interpretations or dogmas, and in its practical guidance it will not lead the community contrary to the purposes of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation.

The Bahá'í Faith as an epistemic community

The body of sacred and authoritative text—the Book, along with legislation and guidance of the House of Justice—demarcates the space within which the community's conversation about the meaning, implications, and application of the Bahá'í teachings takes place. This discourse is intended to be a collaborative process of enquiry in which there is a wide latitude for the free expression of individual views and insights—and even the 'clash of differing opinions' that yields the 'shining spark of truth' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 44.1)—yet which is not an adversarial arena of endless debate. The disputatious habits that characterize the dominant adversarial paradigm are regarded as an impediment to truth-seeking, as 'stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden' (45.1). This approach requires the cultivation of virtues including intellectual humility, moderation in expression, tolerance, fair-mindedness, and detachment from one's own opinions.

In this epistemic community, coherence with the Book and the deductions of the House of Justice is the standard for the logical evaluation of arguments about the meaning and application of the Bahá'í teachings. Nothing prevents an individual from holding or even expressing an erroneous or illogical view (everyone has some of those), although anyone who is committed to

truth is rationally obligated to abandon a view once it has been shown to be invalid according to the epistemic community's criteria of validity. However, if someone persists in advocating an argument that has been demonstrated to contradict the Book or the determinations of the House of Justice, and is creating dissension by ignoring the process for settling such questions, more is being done than expressing an opinion. Such a statement is a speech act that goes beyond refusing to acknowledge that an argument is invalid: it refuses to acknowledge the standard used to judge its validity. Similarly, to set aside an authoritative interpretation in order to assert a contrary one is a speech act that rejects the authority of the interpreter. As Shoghi Effendi put it: '[T]o take exception to one basic principle is to deny the authority and sovereignty of Bahá'u'lláh' (qtd. in Universal House of Justice 1987). At that point, the boundaries of Bahá'í discourse have been breached, as such speech acts violate not only the community's norms of reasoning but the terms of the Covenant.

As is well known, any text, regardless of how ostensibly self-evident its meaning, can be understood differently by different individuals, and religious texts often have multiple meanings intentionally. The susceptibility of texts, even those with an 'evident' meaning, to conflicting interpretations is recognized in the Bahá'í Writings as an inevitable consequence of the differences among individual minds in the acuity of their understanding. Opinions often differ even on minor points, how much more so on matters that are obscure or undetermined. It is just such matters that have historically led to conflict because of the lack of a mutually recognized authority that could decide such questions. For Bahá'ís, that adjudicative authority is the Universal House of Justice. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains,

the deductions and conclusions of individual learned men have no authority, unless they are endorsed by the House of Justice. The difference is precisely this, that from the conclusions and endorsements of the body of the House of Justice . . . no differences will arise; whereas the conclusions of individual divines and scholars would definitely lead to differences, and result in schism. . . .

(in Research Department 2021: 19.4)

Emancipation from the control, and even the influence, of a clerical class, and the democratic nature of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, shape this paradigm of discourse, and the religion itself, in a distinctive way. This fact is obscured by reflexively forcing the Bahá'í Faith into received categories—for example, defining the Bahá'í institutions as an 'ecclesiastical organization' in opposition to the community of believers as 'laity'. Even though in the Bahá'í Faith the door is closed to all personal assertions of epistemic authority, it is not that ventures are never made by individuals to advance their own views through arguments appealing to the authority of expert knowledge, in the style of traditional clerical elites, invoking the old distinction between religious specialists as privileged knowers and laymen as passive recipients of their knowledge.⁵ But the Bahá'í institutions and the community of individual believers share the same covenantal obligation to prevent such revanchist efforts from taking hold.

Reframing dissent

The discursive norms defined by the Covenant are also reflected in the principle that requires unified support for the decisions of the administrative institutions. This principle presupposes both a high level of trust and a strong norm of trustworthiness, a central Bahá'í moral principle. Although the national and local Spiritual Assemblies are not infallible, the covenantal dynamic of proportional recompense operates to reward unity: provided that all support the majority's

decision, any mistakes made will become apparent and be set right. The principle applies to everyone, including members of the decision-making body who were in the minority.

The frank expression of differing views is essential to the deliberative discourse of Bahá'í consultation, and it is considered not only a right but a responsibility for individuals to express their views, including criticism. Administrative decisions may also be appealed to higher levels, ultimately to the Universal House of Justice. But for such criticism to be constructive, it must be expressed directly to the institution or within the relevant forums where decision-making takes place. Critical speech expressed publicly, that is, directly to the community, is a speech act that subverts the authority of the institution by treating the community as the locus of authority. The frank yet cordial clash of views that occurs within the discourse of consultation is thus categorically different from 'dissent', as the term is traditionally understood.

The Covenant in fact changes the way in which 'dissent' must be understood in the Bahá'í context. Because the Western understanding of religious dissent has been shaped by the historical circumstances of Christianity, superficial comparisons of the two contexts obscure important distinctions. Christianity and the Bahá'í Faith share the underlying principles that ground the right of freedom of conscience, as they are central to the concept of covenant, which requires uncoerced consent. The difference between the two contexts consists in the presence in the former, but absence in the latter, of the conditions that activate the right to conscientiously object to the dictates of a religious authority. In the view articulated by John Locke in his classic *Letter concerning Toleration* (1689), dissent is not justifiable merely because a believer disagrees, however adamantly, with the authorities in one's church,⁶ but rather when doctrines and practices not warranted by scripture are imposed by an authority the individual has no obligation to obey—that is, a church to which one does not belong (or as in Locke's Britain, a government on behalf of that church). In the Bahá'í Faith, the Covenant, itself a fundamental part of the Bahá'í scriptures, exists to prevent the introduction of just such unwarranted doctrines, while to be a Bahá'í, by definition, means to accept the totality of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation, including the Covenant. The obligation of obedience that is entailed by the act of freely consenting to recognize an authority by entering into a covenant is a submission not *of* conscience but *in* conscience. It is not contingent on agreement with the authority's every command—otherwise the only authority truly recognized is the self. Since in the Bahá'í Faith the activating conditions (unwarranted doctrines and lack of an obligation of obedience) are absent, the same principles that made dissent justifiable for a Christian make it unjustifiable and a moral contradiction for a Bahá'í.

Public criticism of the Bahá'í administrative institutions and their decisions is also viewed as counterproductive because it obstructs, if not sabotages, the self-corrective process that is the promised outcome of unified support. The minority view may actually be right, but if individuals continue to voice opposition, the state of continual disruption and conflict that is created when energy is channelled into protest and opposition makes it impossible for the right course of action to become evident, as would have happened if there had been unified support of the initial decision.

Covenant-breaking

Breaking the eternal Covenant occurs by violating the commandments of God, that is, the twin duties to recognize the Manifestation of God and obey His laws. However, the term 'Covenant-breaking' is used by Bahá'ís only to describe violation of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh (the Lesser Covenant). It refers to a class of actions that includes openly attempting to claim authority; attacking the validity of the Covenant or its provisions; or opposing any of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá or Shoghi Effendi, or the decisions of the

House of Justice—and attempting to persuade others to join in opposition. It does not apply merely to holding, or even expressing, opinions (even ‘heretical’ ones), but rather to a persistent pattern of actions intended to create division in the Faith. Only in extreme cases is the divisive behaviour considered so refractory as to pose a danger to the community that warrants the designation of Covenant-breaking.

Covenant-breaking applies only to those who have accepted the Covenant of Bahá’u’lláh by becoming members of the Bahá’í Faith.⁷ Membership in the religion is not ascriptive by birth, but by conviction and willing assent. A person born into a Bahá’í family is not compelled to be a Bahá’í, and anyone who no longer believes in Bahá’u’lláh is free to withdraw from the Bahá’í Faith at any time, without stigma. Covenant-breaking does not apply to opponents of the religion who are not Bahá’ís, individuals who have withdrawn from membership but are not engaged in attacking the Covenant, or those who have been removed from membership in the community because they do not share the basic beliefs that are determinative of Bahá’í membership, but who do not directly attack the Covenant.

The decision to designate a person as a Covenant-breaker can only be made by the Head of the Faith (now the Universal House of Justice); individuals are forbidden to make judgements on the spiritual status of other Bahá’ís. It is very rare for an individual to be declared a Covenant-breaker.⁸ The decision is only made after the person has persistently created disunity and dissension by openly attacking or otherwise acting in contravention to the Covenant, has rejected attempts to clarify misconceptions, and has ignored repeated warnings about the consequences of continuing on that course.

Since Covenant-breakers reject the authority of the Head of the Faith (the Universal House of Justice) to decide disputes, their arguments introduce a state of what anthropologists A. R. Beals and B. J. Siegel call ‘divisive conflict’: when radical claims escalate through an organization’s structures for adjudication, resisting all resolution, “‘irreparable breach’ occurs and the organization dissolves’ (1966: 22–23). Bahá’ís maintain that, were they to allow Covenant-breaking arguments to be introduced into the discourse of the community—that is, to normalize them—the Bahá’ís themselves would not only be complicit in dissolving the unity of the Faith and abandoning its peaceful nature and aims by consenting to perpetual conflict, but they would also be conceding the meta-claim that the foundations of the religion are textually indeterminate and subject to alteration or replacement by doctrines that conflict with the Bahá’í scriptures. To do any of that would put the Bahá’ís themselves in violation of the Covenant.

The thrust of Covenant-breaking discourse and the rhetorical strategies employed to propagate it have changed little since ‘Abdu’l-Bahá described the arguments used by Covenant-breakers of His time to undermine His authority and assert their own:

Now some of the mischief-makers, with many stratagems, are seeking leadership, and in order to reach this position they instil doubts among the friends that they may cause differences, and that these differences may result in their drawing a party to themselves. But the friends of God must be awake and must know that the scattering of these doubts hath as its motive personal desires and the achievement of leadership.

(*Selections* 186.6)

Analysing the implied meaning of their arguments, He writes:

One of them saith: ‘[Bahá’u’lláh] hath made us independent of aught else, and hath left no need unmet.’ The secret intent of such a statement is that there is no need for an

appointed Centre. Another exclaimeth: ‘Infallibility belonged to [Bahá’u’lláh] alone; no other person is infallible.’ His inner motive is to assert that [‘Abdu’l-Bahá] is liable to error. Furthermore, they say that one who was regarded with favour, who was a believer or the recipient of a Tablet during the days of [Bahá’u’lláh], cannot possibly be cast out. Their true objective is to hint that were such a person to arise in opposition, or be so bold as to show enmity, no harm would result. . . . The whole purpose of these words is to violate the Covenant and Testament.

(Light of the World 65.5)

Covenant-breaking as disruptive discourse

Historically, religious authorities have responded harshly to apostasy and heresy, often using violence both to punish and to compel offenders to return to the fold or recant heretical beliefs. Imprisonment, confiscation of property, torture, and execution were used—and still are in some countries—to prevent individuals from leaving a religion and to keep heretical ideas from taking hold within it. Bahá’ís regard the existence of the Covenant in itself as the mechanism that ensures the unity of their religion. As the Universal House of Justice describes it:

The central, unifying element of the Faith is the Covenant. This is the institution which guarantees that the Faith and its teachings will remain true to the Revelation. . . . It is the one agency which can protect the Faith against the distortion and disruption to which all previous Revelations have been subjected by the efforts—whether well-intentioned or not—of the self-opinionated and ambitious among their followers to force the Cause of God into patterns which they personally favoured.

(In Research Department 2021: 70.2)

Thus Bahá’ís believe that there is no need for recourse to coercive measures to preserve unity—or any other measures, apart from the freely undertaken commitment of the Bahá’ís themselves to uphold the Covenant and not to allow the divisive discourse of Covenant-breaking to be introduced into the community. ‘Were there any other power that could safeguard Bahá’í unity,’ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote, ‘I would have summoned everyone unto it’ (*Light of the World 64.2*).

As historian of religion Bruce Lincoln explains, whether ‘disruptive discourse’ can succeed in destroying the integrity of a social entity depends on three conditions. First it must ‘gain a hearing’ so that it can be propagated effectively, which ‘largely depends on the ability of its propagators to gain access to and exploit the opportunities inherent within varied channels of communication’. Next, it must be persuasive to the audience. Finally, it must succeed ‘in calling forth a following’ (1989: 8). Bahá’ís respond to the disruptive discourse of Covenant-breaking by denying its proponents the first condition, that of access—by ignoring them. It is clear from the order of the conditions required for the disruptive discourse to achieve its purpose that to focus on the stage of persuasion—for example, to claim that one cannot fairly dismiss an argument unless one has first heard it out—is to beg the question of access. By the time the second condition (persuasion) is operating, the disruptive discourse has already attained its aim because it has gained access and is already propagating itself.

Excommunication and shunning have always been employed in religions, as well as in other social contexts, but the Bahá’í practice of ignoring or ‘shunning’ Covenant-breakers, (which is specified in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will) does not map onto those practices. To shun Covenant-breakers

means to decline to engage in discourse with them by exercising one's freedom not to listen. The purpose is not to punish, or to induce them to change their views or even their behaviour. All attempts to persuade Covenant-breakers to reconsider their course of action are undertaken before the determination is made, but if they remain resolute in their opposition, Bahá'ís make no further attempt to employ persuasion. If they continue to attack the Covenant, they are regarded as having forfeited the rights and privileges of membership in the Bahá'í community and are, from that point, left alone. However, unlike former believers, who no longer identify themselves as Bahá'ís, Covenant-breakers insist on being considered Bahá'ís even while they reject the terms of membership in the Bahá'í Faith.

That the practice of shunning Covenant-breakers is not about punishment, or devaluing persons, but is narrowly focused on preventing disruptive discourse and divisive conflict at the point of entry, is evident in the qualifications that apply to it. Bahá'ís are obliged to scrupulously uphold the civil rights of Covenant-breakers. Thus Bahá'ís may interact with them when it is morally or humanely necessary, or otherwise unavoidable—for example, to repay a debt, fulfil a business obligation, or render professional services such as medical treatment when no other doctor is available, or when one's work requires providing services to the public. In such cases, the interaction is kept to a formal level and limited to the matter at hand. Bahá'ís are directed not to feel hatred towards Covenant-breakers and not to hurt their feelings but to pray for them. Covenant-breakers who have a sincere change of heart can be readmitted to membership in the community.

Covenant-breaking and contagion

Since to reject the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh is to reject His authority, and by implication the authority of God Himself, Covenant-breaking is a form of the cardinal sin in all monotheistic religions—idolatry, or denial of the oneness of God—by ascribing ultimate authority to an entity other than God: the self. In the Bahá'í texts it is sometimes referred to as a spiritual disease, and the need to avoid contact with Covenant-breakers as analogous to the need to avoid contact with a carrier of a communicable illness. Although 'Abdu'l-Bahá applied the analogy of contagion to describe the insidious influence of Covenant-breaking discourse, He also used it to describe the transmission of beneficial ideas, for example: 'Education must be accorded the greatest importance; for just as diseases are highly communicable in the world of bodies, so is character highly communicable in the realm of hearts and spirits' (*Some Answered Questions* 57.8). In recent decades, analogies linking communication and contagion have proliferated in various fields. In social contexts it has been observed that ideas spread from person to person in much the same ways that germs do, while in immunology the biochemical 'strategies' pathogens use to evade the defences of the immune system are viewed as a form of communication at the molecular level. Aspects of both the social and biological analogies are relevant to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements about the nature of Covenant-breaking discourse and its propagation.

In medicine, the immune system is understood to function through what is now viewed as a form of cognition: it 'recognizes' specific forms of non-self tissue as harmful. As its first line of defence, it denies them entry. Viruses, however, have evolved ways to misrepresent themselves to the immune system through a kind of deceptive molecular rhetoric by 'expressing' proteins that disguise their identity in order to gain entry to the host. But once inside, the virus diverts the body's resources to reproduce and propagate the virus's genetic 'information', disrupting the body's normal functions, destroying its integrity, and eventually—at the extreme—causing its death.

The Bahá'í view of Covenant-breaking discourse as contagious, and therefore dangerous to be exposed to—rather than merely the expression of illogical or erroneous views—is not a deterministic theory that sees humans as passive vectors for ideas and therefore not responsible for their beliefs. The ‘gift of understanding’ that enables the soul to recognize and embrace truth also entails a responsibility to reject falsehood. But why all minds would in principle be susceptible to contagious ideas that are false can be understood in the light of Bahá'í teachings about the nature of speech and of human knowledge.

The Bahá'í Writings recognize the power of speech and its inherently rhetorical (persuasive) nature, that ‘[h]uman utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence’. ‘One word is like unto springtime’, Bahá'u'lláh writes, ‘causing the tender saplings of the rose-garden of knowledge to become verdant and flourishing, while another word is even as a deadly poison’ (Lawḥ-i-Maqṣúd, in *Tablets*). The Bahá'í teachings hold that human beings have a dual nature that is always in tension: a higher self, the soul, which has the ability to embrace the good and recognize truth through the exercise of epistemic virtues including humility and detachment from bias, and a lower self, or ego, that is prone to evil—in this context, to the epistemic vices, particularly pride and arrogance, which distort the judgement. Thus every human mind, to the degree that it is beguiled by the promptings of the lower self, is susceptible to sophistry—the subtly deceptive rhetoric that is the stock in trade of the archetypal ‘Evil Whisperer’ who whispers in the hearts. But the most susceptible mind of all is the one that thinks itself immune, because that conviction itself is the sign of arrogance and vulnerability to self-deception. In His Will, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá warns of Covenant-breakers’ employment of sophistry: ‘How often hath grievous error been disguised in the garb of truth, that it might sow the seeds of doubt in the hearts of men!’

The Bahá'í texts also caution against exposing oneself to this discourse by reading the literature of Covenant-breakers, although it is not forbidden to do so, and does not in itself constitute Covenant-breaking. Yet, reading a text establishes a relationship between reader and writer that is ‘a proposed engagement of one mind with another’, in which the text attempts to ‘teach the reader how to read his way into becoming a member of the audience it defines’ by sharing ‘the judgments the text invites him or her to make’ (White 1984: 15).

Covenant-breaking and unity

An objection made by Covenant-breakers and their sympathizers, as well as by others who criticize the Bahá'í Faith, is that excluding Covenant-breakers from the Bahá'í community contradicts the Bahá'í principle of unity. Bahá'ís consider that argument to be a transparently fallacious equivocation on ‘unity’: as with concepts such as freedom and toleration, no coherent conception of unity could include the pursuit of aims that would destroy it. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá addresses this argument directly:

Indeed, the very foundation of the Law of God is that His loved ones should consort with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with the utmost kindness, fellowship, and unity, and with truthfulness, sincerity, and faithfulness. On no account should they behave towards anyone in a manner contrary to this inviolable principle, save for one who is the embodiment of enmity and is intent upon destroying the Law of God. For such souls, there is no remedy whatsoever. No space should be given them to parade and advance. For otherwise they would . . . utterly subvert the mighty foundation of the Cause of God.

(Light of the World 6.14)

Elsewhere He explains the similar limitation that practical wisdom places on virtues such as kindness: one must

treat compassionately all humankind—except for those who have some selfish, private motive, or some disease of the soul. Kindness cannot be shown the tyrant, the deceiver, or the thief, because, far from awakening them to the error of their ways, it maketh them to continue in their perversity as before. No matter how much kindness ye may expend upon the liar, he will but lie the more, for he believeth you to be deceived. . . .
(*Selections* 138.1)

Schism and speech acts

Bahá'ís consider that, as with the concept of dissent, the existence of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh creates new conditions which make Covenant-breaking, in relation to the Bahá'í Faith, categorically different from the historical process of schism that divided other religions into numerous denominations organized as separate religious societies, each considering itself the true embodiment of the founder's intentions. As a result of that historical process, terms like 'Christianity' are now primarily understood in a general or generic sense, with the denominations or sects standing in a relation to one another as 'species' of a 'genus'. This category distinction is employed by Locke in explaining that both Catholics and Protestants 'profess faith in Christ, and are therefore called Christians, yet are not both of the same religion' (1689: 55). But in the Bahá'í Faith, no such genus-species distinction exists.

Because the founder of Christianity left no explicit written covenant, no one church can claim, with indisputable scriptural justification, the exclusive right to the name 'Christian'. In contrast, the Bahá'í Faith is an entity constituted by the Covenant as its founder's written charter, which provides its foundational legal framework. Such formally constituted entities have not only a legal but a moral right to their identity, which no one can usurp. Of course, the fact that an action is illegal or immoral has never prevented anyone from doing it, but it does prevent them from being able to claim that they are doing it legitimately and that others are therefore obliged to recognize the action as valid. To understand why the Bahá'í Faith as a religion possesses a unique and proprietary identity, and why forming a separate group that claims the name 'Bahá'í' is impossible in anything but a trivial sense, it is instructive to consider how performative speech acts create social (and legal) reality.

Nothing prevents nine people from putting on black robes and solemnly declaring themselves to be the Supreme Court of the United States, but no one would seriously say that their doing so means that there now in fact exist two Supreme Courts. The reason we find the idea absurd is that for a performative speech act (such as a coronation, a wedding, a hiring or firing, and so on) to succeed—that is, to change social reality and create a social (and legal) fact—several conditions must be met (Austin 1975). No matter how sincerely the speaker believes the words uttered, the act fails if the authorizing conditions are not fulfilled. Those conditions, which specify who can perform the act, are determined by the relevant community; their fulfilment makes the speech act valid and confers legality on it as a social reality that has consequences, including the right to be recognized. Because previous religious covenants of succession were undetailed and unwritten, the authorizing conditions for creating institutions and subsidiary laws, and resolving doctrinal questions, would always be contestable because they lacked a scriptural foundation. In the Bahá'í Faith, the authorizing conditions governing all matters, whether executive or interpretive, are explicit and embedded in the scripture.

Thus Bahá'ís consider that the fact that some individuals have set themselves apart from the community and formed groups which they assert to be some species of the Bahá'í Faith does not mean—in any non-trivial sense—that the Bahá'í Faith has experienced schism. Refusing to recognize Covenant-breakers as members of the religion merely acknowledges that, as they themselves insist, they have rejected the conditions of membership; in doing so, by definition they have separated themselves from the Bahá'í Faith.

Challenges to the covenant

Each stage in the history of the Bahá'í Faith has seen challenges to the Covenant, although the focus of attacks has differed over time. The first and most serious attempt to nullify the Covenant and divide the religion occurred immediately after the death of Bahá'u'lláh, when Mírzá Muḥammad-'Alí, one of His sons, launched a campaign to displace his half-brother 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh's appointed successor. Bahá'u'lláh had been aware of the duplicitous and envious character of this son and had assigned him a station that was conditional on his obedience to the Covenant—and therefore to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Muḥammad-'Alí immediately forfeited his right to that station by rebelling against 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and for many years, driven by consuming envy, he did his worst to destroy and discredit Him, including conspiring to have Him killed.

To introduce dissension and doubt, Muḥammad-'Alí and his supporters spread rumours that 'Abdu'l-Bahá had claimed a station equal to Bahá'u'lláh's and had even claimed to be God; then, professing shock at such heresy, they refuted those claims as blasphemous. Muḥammad-'Alí would also brazenly send his children, dressed in rags, to beg for bread and money at the homes of prominent Muslims in 'Akká, claiming that the family was starving because 'Abdu'l-Bahá had cut off their income. In reality, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family were living austere in order to supply Muḥammad-'Alí's demands to maintain himself in comparative luxury in the mansion of Bahjí. 'Abdu'l-Bahá endured Muḥammad-'Alí's subversive machinations for some years, and only when Muḥammad-'Alí began an open campaign to incite the community in Iran to rebellion did 'Abdu'l-Bahá expel him from the Faith.

In Iran, some prominent Bahá'ís had been Muslim clerics before entering the Faith and were accustomed to enjoying the prerogatives of the clergy, including receiving deference and exerting authority and power. Most of them willingly abandoned that role, and though they remained the most respected of Bahá'í scholars, were among the humblest of believers. But a few were unwilling to relinquish their former status, and after the passing of Bahá'u'lláh they sensed an opportunity to seize power. The most prominent of them was Jamál-i-Burújirdí, who had continued to dress like a cleric, wearing a large turban to signify his importance. He was also known to keep his hand visibly available to be kissed, despite the explicit prohibition of that practice in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. When his ambitions to power were decisively frustrated, he joined with Muḥammad-'Alí, who promised him the leadership of the Faith in Iran. However, once Muḥammad-'Alí and his supporters, including Burújirdí, were expelled, the Bahá'ís ignored them, and the mutiny collapsed so thoroughly that by the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing, Covenant-breaking was virtually unknown among the Bahá'ís in Iran (Taherzadeh 1992: 217).

A further challenge to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's authority was made in the United States by Ibrahim Kheiralla, a Syrian Christian who became a Bahá'í in 1890 in Cairo and moved to Chicago, where he was instrumental in establishing the Bahá'í Faith in the United States. Though relatively uninformed about the Bahá'í teachings, which he freely mixed with his own ideas, he attracted a considerable number of individuals who would become the nucleus of the American Bahá'í community. But he harboured aspirations to leadership and turned against 'Abdu'l-Bahá,

eventually allying himself with Muḥammad-‘Alí. The group Kheiralla formed around himself in 1900 soon dwindled and eventually disappeared (Stockman 1985: 177).

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá died in 1921, naming his grandson Shoghi Effendi, then just 24, as the Guardian and Head of the Faith, another moment of vulnerability seemed to present itself. Muḥammad-‘Alí again attempted to claim leadership but was roundly ignored. It was generally expected that the Universal House of Justice would be elected immediately after ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, and some individuals, like Ahmad Sohrab, who had been a secretary of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, pressed Shoghi Effendi to arrange for its early formation, expecting to be elected. But Shoghi Effendi decided that the foundations of the administrative structure must be built first, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will called for the House of Justice to be elected by the national Spiritual Assemblies, which were yet to be raised up.

When the implications of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will became evident and Sohrab found the new, elected Assemblies an obstacle to his efforts to form an independent group around himself, he began to charge that his freedom of speech was being repressed and to attack first the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada and ultimately even Shoghi Effendi and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Cast out of the community, Sohrab founded an organization to promote his own eclectic doctrine, which had little resemblance to the Bahá’í teachings. After his death it became a cultural society without any religious component.

Another prominent figure who urged Shoghi Effendi to form the Universal House of Justice immediately was ‘Abdu’l-Ḥusayn Áyatí, known as Áváríh. A former Muslim cleric, he was a learned author and the most prominent teacher of the Faith in Iran. He insinuated that if Shoghi Effendi did not comply, he would incite the Bahá’ís in Iran to rise against him but later suggested that an annual income could persuade him to change his attitude (Taherzadeh 1992: 335, 337). When that bid went unanswered, he renounced his membership in the Bahá’í Faith and vowed to destroy it, setting out to do so by publishing three lengthy volumes vilifying it, distorting its aims and motives, and attacking Bahá’u’lláh Himself, in order to poison public opinion against the Bahá’í Faith.

In the West, an American woman, Ruth White, attempted to discredit the Administrative Order by challenging the authenticity of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will, although she could not read the original document as she did not know Persian. Her claim was widely regarded as ludicrous, especially among Persians, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s handwriting was well known to all. Shoghi Effendi’s reaction to her campaign was characteristic of his response to all such challenges, welcoming it as an opportunity for the Bahá’í community to deepen its knowledge and understanding as well as its resoluteness in upholding the Covenant by ignoring White and her associates. White’s accusations had little or no effect in areas like North America and Britain, where the Bahá’ís had already had experience with Covenant-breaking, but it caused some commotion for a time and acquired a few supporters in other areas, like Germany, where the community had not yet been exposed to it.

Shoghi Effendi’s death in 1957 came as a shock to the Bahá’í world, especially when it was discovered that he had not named anyone to succeed him as Guardian. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Will stipulated that the Guardian must appoint his own successor, either his firstborn son or another member of the *Aghṣán* (male descendants of Bahá’u’lláh), and that the appointment must be ratified by the Hands of the Cause. Shoghi Effendi had no children, and because the rest of the *Aghṣán* had broken the Covenant, there was no one left who was eligible, so he obeyed the terms of the Will in the only way open to him: he appointed no one. Nevertheless, in 1960 Charles Mason Remey, a Hand of the Cause from the United States, declared himself to be the second Guardian even though he met none of the criteria and had himself signed the statements

of the Hands of the Cause affirming that Shoghi Effendi had not, and could not have, appointed a successor. Most Bahá'ís perceived Remey's claim as absurd, but he attracted a few supporters, many of whom later abandoned him. Remey and his followers were expelled as Covenant-breakers, but even before his death in 1974, they split into quarrelling factions that excommunicated each other, and, like earlier Covenant-breakers, eventually drifted further away, in terms of doctrinal content, from the Bahá'í teachings.

However, the successor appointed in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will was not just the Guardianship; it was the Administrative Order, headed by the Universal House of Justice, which was first elected in 1963. In not appointing another Guardian, Shoghi Effendi had observed the implicit logic of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will, but the contents of the second part of the Will assume conditions in which the Universal House of Justice would function without the presence of a living Guardian, and verse 42 of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas anticipates the end of the line of Guardians and the continuation of the Faith under the direction of the Universal House of Justice alone.

Shoghi Effendi had devoted much effort to educating the Bahá'ís, through his translations of Bahá'í scriptures and his general letters, about the teachings of the Faith, particularly the Administrative Order. As the Bahá'ís themselves gained a greater understanding, and as they participated in raising that structure—by forming the local, then regional and national, Assemblies and electing the Universal House of Justice—arguments denying the legitimacy of the structure they had just built were even less persuasive. Today they have no traction at all. Like other stridently transgressive phenomena, Covenant-breaking tends to attract attention disproportionately to the small numbers involved, but it is most notable for its failure, over the first two centuries of the Bahá'í Faith's existence, to create a genuine rupture in the religion or to alter its nature.

Conclusion

Although the Bahá'í texts treat the disruptive discourse of Covenant-breaking as a mortal threat to the unity of the religion, it is not considered to have any serious chance of succeeding, as it has no positive power of its own but only fallacy's illusory simulacrum of truth. When an individual once asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá what could be done about the agitation of the Covenant-breakers led by Muḥammad-'Alí, He responded:

So long as [the Covenant-breakers] still harbour the hope that, through such machinations and such absurdities, the living waters of the Covenant may be diverted from their natural course and its shining star shifted into another orbit, these seditions will in no wise cease. . . . Were the friends, however, to arise as they should to defend the Covenant and Testament, and to show forth steadfastness and constancy, then these souls would despair of altering and subverting the Centre of the Covenant and abandon their schemes and provocations.

(1897, Tablet of One Thousand Verses [provisional translation])

In comparison to previous dispensations, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote, 'the attempts to break the Covenant in this Dispensation are of no importance whatsoever' (*Light of the World* 64.3). Interestingly, the example He cites is Arius, the Patriarch of Alexandria. 'Abdu'l-Bahá does not charge Arius with violating the Covenant of Christ because of his 'heretical' doctrine denying the consubstantiality of God and the Son (Bahá'ís would agree that nothing is consubstantial with the Essence of God), but because Arius, whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes as 'an orator, articulate of speech and a very audacious and powerful person who succeeded in bringing one

and a half million people under his influence' (*Light of the World* 64.3), divided the religion of Christ. In this view, even if Arius was theologically correct, he was spiritually and morally wrong to cause division. Other statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's, such as '[I]f two souls contend with one another, both are wrong,' must also be understood in light of the primacy of avoiding contention: not even being right justifies creating division and conflict, 'for there is no fault or defect greater than discord. Perceptions differ; should the understanding of individuals be made the authority on matters, . . . darkest night would descend' (c. 1898).

As a religion, the Bahá'í Faith is still very young, and no other religion has ever been structured from its inception to prevent conflict and schism solely by non-coercive, peaceful means. As part of the project of individual and social transformation to which the religion is dedicated, Bahá'ís strive to divest themselves of residual adversarial habits from the culture around them and to develop the virtues that support the consultative paradigm. Facing periodic new challenges has impelled the community to gain a deeper understanding of the implications of the Covenant in both personal and collective life. In that process, it has increasingly developed a form of rhetorical 'acquired immunity' to efforts to introduce disruptive discourse and pursue ambitions to power. Thus, when in the decades following the establishment of the Universal House of Justice, some tried to introduce a form of factional pressure politics, and to reinterpret the provisions of the Covenant to reduce the scope of authority of the Guardian and the House of Justice in order to create a space outside that jurisdiction where doctrinal matters would be decided by learned experts, the attempts failed.⁹ When such matters are referred to the House of Justice for resolution and it determines the propositions to be invalid, the arguments lose any persuasive power within the community and are unable to propagate dissension and conflict.

The Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, with its abolition of the priesthood, has implications more far-reaching than simply doing without a class of professional religious leaders. Bahá'u'lláh's statement that 'power hath been seized' from 'kings and ecclesiastics' (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*) does not mean that there should no longer be monarchies of any kind, or learned scholars who contribute their wisdom and insights to enrich the knowledge of the community (He approves of both). Rather, He removed the ability of the self-appointed to exert authority and power over the lives and the minds of the people. Through the Covenant, He removed the ability of the ambitious to exert power over His religion, by closing the door to the pursuit of power itself.

Notes

- 1 See Qur'an 7:172, in which, in the world of pre-existence, all are called to enter into the Covenant by speaking the words 'Yea, verily!', and 3:81. For examples of violating the Covenant through speech acts, see Genesis 3 and Isaiah 14:13–14. Eve breaks the law of God by eating the forbidden fruit; she breaks the Covenant by giving herself permission to eat it.
- 2 While other religious groups, notably Protestant churches, reject the conception of priesthood as a class separate from the body of believers, most retain a professional clergy.
- 3 On the distinction between being 'in authority' and 'an authority' see Lincoln (1994).
- 4 This is also considered the entry point for religious doctrines that conflict with science.
- 5 See, for example, Universal House of Justice, in Research Department 2021: 71.1.
- 6 In that case, Locke says, one should exercise one's freedom to leave the church (see especially 1689: 13–16).
- 7 Membership is defined in the By-Laws of the Universal House of Justice (1972).
- 8 During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, twenty individuals were expelled from the Bahá'í community as Covenant-breakers, or an average of one per year, out of a worldwide community of some five to eight million.
- 9 See, for example, Research Department 2021: 70.12 and 77.1–5.

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