

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet on the Functioning of the Universal House of Justice*

A Provisional Translation and Commentary

Moojan Momen

I. Some translation issues

Early last year, a translation was posted by Dr Juan Cole of a tablet by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that dealt with the functioning and authority of the Universal House of Justice: “On the House of Justice and Bahá’í Jurisprudence.” The translation, which has now been posted to the H-Bahai web-site, has a number of places where the translation is infelicitous and appears to be due to a misapprehension and, in one place, to a mis-reading of the text.

In the first part of this presentation, I discuss in detail those points of translation where I differ from Dr Cole; in the second part, I present an alternative translation of the whole tablet; while in the third part, I discuss a number of issues arising out of these points of translation.

The first point at which there is an inappropriate translation is the following sentence:

*It should not be thought that the house of justice will
make decisions out of self-interest. I take refuge in*

* In the summer of 2001, Dr Juan Cole posted a translation of a tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá on an e-mail list that he runs, called H-Baháí. I then wrote a response to this in 2002, pointing out a number of problems with this translation. This paper is the response that I made, slightly altered to make is more easily readable. Dr Cole responded on the H-Baháí list to what I written and I append to this paper an e-mail that I wrote replying to this.

God! The greatest house of justice makes decisions and laws by virtue of the inspiration and confirmation of the holy spirit.

The transliteration and word-for-word translation of this is as follows:

hamchih muláhizih nashavad kih bayt al-`adl

Thus it should not be considered that the House of Justice

bih fikr va ra'y-i khísh qarári dihand.

by/through its own thought and opinion shall give a decree/ruling.

Istaghfar Alláh!

I take refuge with God [from such a thought]!

Bayt al-`adl-i a`zam bi ilhám va ta'yid-i

The most mighty House of Justice by/through inspiration and the confirmation

rúh al-quds qarár va ahkám járí nimáyad

of the holy spirit decrees/rulings and laws shall give (or execute)

There is nothing in the sentence that could be translated as “self-interest.” The two sentences are set against one another and this is made clear by the use of “*qarár*” in both sentences and by the exclamation between them. The first sentence states that the House of Justice will not base its rulings on the arbitrary opinions of its members and the second sentence goes on to explain why that should be so – because its ruling will be inspired and confirmed by the Holy Spirit.

In the next sentence there is a minor point: this next sentence is somewhat stronger than is suggested by Cole’s translation. There are three words which Cole has rendered as just one word “protection”: *vaqáyat va himáyat va siyánat*. It is true that they all have much the same meaning, but to translate them all with one word does not convey the full force of the original.

The previous point is a fairly minor one compared to the problem in the next paragraph. The sentence in question is given by Cole as: "This is the wisdom of giving the house of justice the purview over personal status ordinances (*ahkám-i madaniyyih*)." The word *madaniyyih* comes from the root *m-d-n* meaning to "stay" or "dwell." The word *madína* which means "city" or "town" comes from the same root. It is the exact cognate in Islamic philosophical writing of the Latin "*civis*" and the Greek "*polis*" (see S. Afnan, *Philosophical Lexicon in Persian and Arabic*, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1262/1983, p. 278). Thus the adjective "*madani*" and its feminine form "*madaniyyih*" can be rendered "urban," "civil," "civilizational," or "social." Its meaning is therefore the exact opposite of Cole's rendering of "personal status." "*Madaniyyih*" refers not to the personal and private aspects of human life but to the social and civil.

In the next paragraph, the main problem appeared to be that of extraneous material which does not appear in the original text. There are some 30 words or more for which there is no basis in the text as published on H-Bahai and Cole has not indicated that he has used any other text. There is nothing in the text that corresponds to his passage: "that the jurisprudential reasoning or adoption of such by the institution of the house of justice, whose members are elected and seen as legitimate by the generality of the community, will not provoke discord." The text reads: "*wa farq hamín ast kih as istinbát-i `ulama hukman ikhtiláf hásil shavad va ba `ith-i tafriq ...*" In other words, the text runs directly on from the sentence that Cole has translated as: "...unless it is adopted by the house of justice. The difference is this..." to the passage that he has translated as: "...the jurisprudential rulings of individual scholars can provoke disputes and cause division..." There is nothing in between that could allow for the extensive passage that Cole has inserted here. I was somewhat surprised by this. However, I noticed that Cole's added text breaks off and resumes at exactly the same word *istinbát*. This is a good clue to the fact that the copyist of the text on H-Bahai (taken from INBA 59, pp. 275-80) has skipped from one occurrence of a word to another when copying. I therefore looked around for other texts of the same tablet and eventually found an alternative text for the bulk of this tablet in 'Abdu'l-Hamíd Ishráq-Khávarí, *Rahíq Makhtúm*, vol. 1, Tehran: Mu'assisih

Millí Matbú'át Amrí, 130 B.E., pp. 370-3. This text does have the missing passage in it. Since there is good evidence as I have indicated that this is a passage that the copyist of the INBA text skipped over, I have therefore inserted this passage into the translation below in square parentheses.

In the next paragraph, we again have Cole translating “*madaniyyat*” as “personal status”: “As for the command to marry, this is entirely a personal status law.” The same comments as above apply here. However one translates “*madaniyyat*,” it means the exact opposite of the personal and private. Indeed Cole acknowledges as much when, two and three sentences later, the phrase “*qawá'id-i madaniyyat*” occurs twice in successive sentences and is both times translated by Cole as “the principles of civilization.” If “*madaniyyat*” here should be translated as “civilization,” then two sentences before “*madaniyyih*” should be translated the same way (*madaniyyat* and *madaniyyih* being two different ways in which the same Arabic word has been taken over into Persian – the first as a noun and the second as an adjective): “As for the command to marry, this is entirely a civil law (or a law of civilization).”

Despite acknowledging that “*madaniyyat*” in the phrase “*qawá'id-i madaniyyat*” means “civilisation,” three sentences later, Cole is back to translating “*madani*” and, in the next sentence, “*madaniyyih*” (*madani* is the masculine form of *madaniyyih*) as “personal status” (“But this ruling is implemented in all the Christian denominations, since this matter is purely one of personal status” and “If you consider, it will be apparent that this matter – that is, putting personal status law under the purview of the house of justice – is remarkably consistent with wisdom”). As before, an adjective deriving from a root meaning the “*polis*” or “*civis*” should be translated as “civil” or “societal” or “political” but not “personal status.”

One can also point to the evidence of the next paragraph for proof that the intention of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is that the House of Justice has purview over social laws rather than just laws of personal status. In this next paragraph, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá turns His attention to the matter of criminal law and makes the point

that, in Islam, the matter of those punishments not specified in the Qur'án was according to the whim of the ruler. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to make the same point again that He made earlier with respect to marriage law: "*this most great cycle has been so arranged that its laws can remain appropriate to and in accord with all ages and eras in a way that past systems of religious law could not*" and "*this holy, divine, law of God is appropriate to all times and ages.*" This is a clear reference to the point that He has made in the preceding paragraph, the ability of the House of Justice to alter its own rulings. Thus, on a matter that is clearly a social question, the question of criminal punishments, and not a matter of personal status, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is again indicating that this is a matter for reference to the House of Justice. Clearly the punishment for crimes such as theft and assault, for which there is no provision in the Kitáb Aqdas, is a social matter and not "personal status laws." (I will deal in Part III with Cole's contention that this paragraph should be taken to mean that the Universal House is restricted to rulings on matters of religious law. I am here dealing only with the translation issue and am seeking to establish that *ahkám-i madaniyyih* should be translated as "social laws" and not as "personal status laws.")

There is also the sentence that Cole has translated as: "This was, for the most part, the pivot of the administration of justice (*siyásat*) in the Muslim community." Since 'Abdu'l-Bahá has immediately before this referred to the "ruler" or "those in power," it would seem that a better translation, given this context would be: "This was what leadership among the people of Islam mostly revolved around" or "This is what government of the people of Islam mostly revolved around."

Finally a word on a later alteration that Cole has made. In his first version, he had the words: "Nevertheless, this blessed cycle is the greatest of divine dispensations, and for this reason, it encompasses spiritual and physical aspects." Later he changed the translation of "*jismání*" from "physical" to "of the spiritual body." Now the dictionary definition of "*jism*" is "body," "substance" or "flesh" and *jismání* is the adjective deriving from this. Thus the alteration that Cole has made has the effect of changing the meaning of the word from referring to the physical to referring to the spiritual (i.e. its antonym).

Cole justifies reversing the universally understood meaning of this word “*jismání*” by referring to the writings of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsá’í: “That is, *jasad* I has a connotation of primarily the physical body made up of physical elements. *Jasad* II has some superlunary elements from the intermediary plane between the physical world and the imaginal world of Forms. *Jasad* I will perish entirely, and only parts of *Jasad* II will survive. The post-death, post-resurrectionary body would be made up of the more ethereal *Jism* I and *Jism* II.”

Now there are a number of points to be made in respect to this alteration which brings in a metaphorical meaning that is the exact opposite of the plain meaning:

1. While one cannot deny that Shaykh Ahmad did develop these arcane theories, this fact alone cannot justify the change of translation here. There are many Shaykhí ideas and terminologies that did not transfer over to the Bahá’í scriptures – the word *húrqalyá* is an example that readily comes to mind as an example of Shaykhí terminology that did not transfer to the Bahá’í writings. Before one could accept Cole’s translation, one would have to see evidence that this particular usage was adopted in the Bahá’í scriptures. I can find no such evidence. Indeed one can find evidence of both Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá frequently using the word *jism* in its ordinary usage meaning the physical body, for example: “*Man, however, though in body (jism) the captive of nature is yet free in his mind and soul, and hath the mastery over nature.*” (Tablet to Dr Forel, *Bahá’í World*, vol. 15, Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1976, p. 38).

2. That the word *jismání* refers to physical reality rather than spiritual reality is confirmed by the context within which the word appears in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s text. The first sentence states that “As for the rest of the commandments, they are derivatives of certitude, faith, assurance and mystical insight” – i.e. they are of a spiritual nature. He then says “*bá vujúd-i ín*” – which means “nevertheless” or “despite this” and, as anyone familiar with Persian will confirm, sets up the next sentence to be in some degree of contradiction to the first. Thus the next sentence cannot mean “it encompasses spiritual aspects and aspects of the spiritual body” since that would be of similar meaning to the first sentence and would not give the required degree of contradiction. Only the plain meaning “physical and

spiritual aspects (or stages)” – the way that Cole had originally translated this – would makes sense here. In order to make this more clear, I give here a word-for-word analysis:

Va amá ahkám sá'irih, far`-i Íqán

And as for the laws remaining, derivatives of certitude
va imán va itminám va `irfán ast.

and faith and assurance and mystical insight they are.

Bá vujúd ín chún dawr-i mubáarak

Nevertheless/despite this because the blessed cycle
a `zam-i advár-i ilahí ast,

the greatest of divine cycles is,

lihadhá jámi` jamí`-yi

therefore/on account of this, the entirety of all of the
marátib-i rawhaní va jismání

stages spiritual and physical

va dar kamál quvvat va saltanat ast.

and in perfect power and sovereignty it is.

3. Furthermore, the phrase which follows immediately on from this one that Cole wishes to re-translate so that it only refers to the spiritual is also evidence against his alteration since it again focusses the attention on the worldly. This “blessed cycle” is said to be “perfect in its power and sovereignty (*quvvat va saltanat*).” The word *saltanat* refers to kingship and thus refers to earthly authority. Even when the word is being used of God, it is referring to his temporal authority over the world.

4. Much more significant than even these points is the fact that this whole issue has arisen out of a misreading of the text. Cole states that the reason that he has made this change is an apparent contradiction:

For one reason or another I've had a little time to think, lately, and I continued to ponder the apparent

contradiction in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s circa 1899 letter on jurisprudence ... At the beginning of the letter, he reassures his correspondent: ‘First of all, this divine cycle is solely spiritual, full of godly compassion, and is a matter of conscience. It has no connection at all to physical (*jasadî*), material (*mulkî*), or worldly (*nasutî*) matters. In the same way, the Christian dispensation was purely spiritual.’ Then later he says, ‘Nevertheless, this blessed cycle is the greatest of divine dispensations, and for this reason, it encompasses spiritual and physical (*jismání*) aspects and is perfect in its power and authority.’ These two statements appear to be in contradiction.

In fact if one studies the text carefully, one finds that the whole case that Cole has constructed (in his e-mail dated 28 January 2001) is based on his misreading of the text. The whole of the dichotomy that Cole has set up between *jasad* and *jism* and which he resolves by appeal to Shaykh Ahmad, is based on an incorrect reading of *jismání* as *jasadí* in the first of the two sentences cited. This sentence should read: “It has no connection at all to physical (*jismání*), material (*mulkî*), or worldly (*nasutî*) matters.” Cole’s transliteration here (*jasadí*) is incorrect – the word in the text is *jismání*. The alternative text in Ishráq-Khávárí, *Rahíq Makhtúm*, also reads *jismání*. Of course it would be nonsense to translate *jismání* in Shaykh Ahmad’s sense of “spiritual” in this first sentence, where its meaning, as Cole has acknowledged, is clearly physical and intended in an opposite sense to *rawhaní* (spiritual) just before (“this divine cycle is solely spiritual, full of godly compassion, and is a matter of conscience. It has no connection at all to physical, material, or worldly matters”). Therefore, unless we are going to suggest that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has used the same word (*jismání*) with two diametrically opposite meanings in the same sort of context in the same tablet, it is difficult to see how Cole’s argument can be sustained.

5. Incidentally, in the first of these two sentences under consideration, the translation “It has no connection at all to the physical...” is too strong; the Persian “*chandán nadárad*” would be better translated as: “It is not so much concerned [with the physical]...” – it is an expression of relative and not

absolute negation – thus allowing for some worldly concerns. In other words, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s intention is not to negate any connection at all with worldly matters, but to state that Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation is primarily spiritual and only secondarily concerned with worldly affairs. Once this correction is made, then it can be seen that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s later statement that “this blessed cycle encompasses all spiritual and physical aspects” – the sentence that has troubled Cole (“These two statements appear to be in contradiction”) and caused him to reinterpret *jismání* – is longer contradictory and no change of meaning need be postulated.

6. There is also the interesting phrase: *fa saltanatuhá malakútiyyah rahmáníyyah wa ahkámuhá ilhámiyyah rawháníyyah* (and so its sovereignty is heavenly and divine and its laws are inspired and spiritual). I may be over-interpreting here but it seems to me that having just stated that the Universal House of Justice is under the guidance and protection of Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is here going on to say that, as a consequence of this, the authority of the House of Justice is not based on any worldly mandate (i.e. its mandate is not from those who elect it or any other worldly source), but rather a Divine one. The second phrase here states that the laws and ordinances that the Universal House of Justice enacts, although they appear to be concerning worldly matters (such as marriage regulations and criminal punishment), are in reality spiritual in nature, because they are inspired (*ilhám*) from a heavenly source. This then explains why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is able to say in the first part of this tablet that “The first [point to be made] is this that this divine cycle is purely spiritual, divine and moral.” What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is saying is that even where the Universal House of Justice is legislating in areas of civil laws (*ahkám-i madaniyyih*) that are necessary for human social life, these should not be seen as temporal and secular matters that can be judged in accordance with the standards and values of the world, but rather they should be seen as issuing from a divine source and are thus to be regarded as being part of the sacred and spiritual sphere. They should thus be regarded in the same way as the laws given by Bahá’u’lláh.

One can see from all this that this tablet was not generated by an individual having concerns about “the possible

theocratic implications of the legislative role of the house of justice.” Rather this was a simple and straightforward question asking ‘Abdu’l-Bahá the obvious point that: if the Manifestation of God is all-knowing, what then is the wisdom behind the fact that Bahá’u’lláh did not reveal many social laws, but rather referred most social ordinances (*ahkám-i madaniyyiyih*) to the House of Justice? The questioner presumably asked whether it would not have been better if these laws were revealed by an all-knowing Manifestation of God, rather than being left to a group of fallible human beings to decide. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reassures the questioner that, firstly, this arrangement by Bahá’u’lláh is in accordance with Divine wisdom in that it allows for the social ordinances of the religion to alter as human social conditions change over the centuries rather than being fixed by a once-and-for-all revelation; and secondly, the House of Justice, is in any case inspired and under the guidance and protection of Bahá’u’lláh and therefore any ruling it makes will have this guidance and protection and will be the result of this inspiration. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also goes on to demonstrate how this is a much superior arrangement to what has occurred in previous dispensations.

A summary of the contents of this tablet:

In this tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá starts by laying down the principle that the Bahá’í Faith is similar to Christianity in that its central concern is with spiritual matters and that all legal matters (*ahkám*) are derived from this spiritual core. However, he goes on to state that, since this dispensation is “the most mighty of Divine dispensations,” it encompasses both the spiritual and physical concerns of humanity, and has “perfect power and authority (*quvvat va saltanat*),” therefore provisions have also been made for social and political matters: some foundational core matters are determined in the scripture while subsidiary matters which may vary with time and circumstance are referred to the House of Justice.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá then goes on to lay down the principle that since the House of Justice will give its rulings based on the Divine inspiration (*ilhám*) that it receives and not on the opinions of its individual members, it is therefore obligatory upon all to obey it. In other words that it is not permissible to

argue that a particular decision of the House of Justice is due to the biases of one or all of its members and is therefore not incumbent upon all. It is because of this Divine inspiration that social and civil ordinances (*ahkám madaniyyih*) have been placed under its aegis.

'Abdu'l-Bahá then turns His attention to Islam and states that because only a little of Islamic law was revealed in the Qur'án, it became necessary for legal rulings to be derived. As a consequence the different schools of law arose and there were disputes between scholars. This in turn led to factions and schism. Abdu'l-Bahá then states that in the Bahá'í Faith all such *ahkám-i madaniyyih* (social or civil ordinances) must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. Individual legal opinions have no force unless they are adopted by the Universal House of Justice.

'Abdu'l-Bahá then moves on to two examples of the point that he is making. He takes the case of marriage, which He calls an *ahkám-i madaniyyih* — a social or civil ordinance. He says that the main stipulations of this have been laid down in the revealed law, but the question of marriage of near relatives is left to the House of Justice. He then goes on to give the example of Christianity, where, although there was no scriptural sanction against the marriage of near relatives, the Christian Councils ruled against it. The second example that 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives is that of *ta'zír* — those punishments for crimes that are not specified in the scripture. He states that in Islam this became subject to the whim of the ruler — and was therefore very variable. He states that in this dispensation, the *ta'zír* — those punishments for crimes that are not specified in the Bahá'í scripture should be referred to the House of Justice. He extols this as a better method of dealing with this issue since, otherwise, the same situation as in Islam would arise where the punishments laid down in the Shari`ah are no longer acceptable in the modern world. The enactment of such social regulations and ordinances in the Bahá'í dispensation will be “compatible with all ages and cycles,” He states, because it will be referred to the House of Justice, and each successive House of Justice can abrogate the rulings of its predecessors.

II. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Tablet on the Functioning of the Universal House of Justice – a provisional translation

In this part, I present a translation of this tablet. This translation is more literal than Cole’s, and some may therefore find it more difficult to read, but I thought a more literal translation was appropriate. I have kept to the text from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Majmú’ih-yi Makátib-i ‘Abdu’l-Bahá* (Collected Letters of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá). Copied 1318/1900. Iran National Bahá’í Archives, Volume 59, pp. 275-280, published on H-Bahai at: <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/bahai/abtext.htm>, except where, for reasons that I have indicated in Part I, I have included a passage of almost 30 words (“from the derivations and endorsements of the House of Justice ... no differences will arise, whereas”) in square parentheses translated from an alternative text at Ishraq-Khavari, *Rahiq Makhtum*, vol. 1, pp. 370-3.

He is the All-Glorious!

O you who are clinging fast to the hem of Covenant, your letter was read and your detailed questions were noted. Although calamities, like deadly poison, have affected my limbs, my members and my joints, such that my pen is prevented from writing and my tongue from speaking, and my tasks are so many that it is not possible to describe them, yet nevertheless, out of the great love that this servant has for that gentleman, a spiritual answer will be given, which will be compatible with Divine wisdom, concise and illuminating, perfectly explaining the matter. It will be a comprehensive explanation concerning this question and will contain acceptable and sought-after insights such that by this explanation, clarification, analysis, allusion, commentary and spiritual interpretation, one hundred doors will be opened up by each of its doors. Otherwise, were the horizons to become pages, it would not be enough to encompass [this theme].

You have asked about the wisdom of assigning some of the important legislation (ahkám) to the House of

Justice. The first [point to be made] is this that this divine cycle is purely spiritual (rawhání), divine (rahmání) and moral (vujdání). It is not so much concerned with the physical (jismání), the worldly (mulkí) or with the stages of material existence (shu'ún-i násutí). Similarly, the Christian cycle was purely spiritual and in the entirety of the Gospels, there is nothing except the prohibition of divorce and an allusion to the lifting of the [law of the] Sabbath. All of the laws (ahkám) are spiritual and the morals divine. Just as it is said: "The Son of Man did not come to judge the world but to give it life." [cf. Jn 3:17; 12:47] Now this great cycle is also purely spiritual and is the giver of eternal life, for the fundamental basis of the religion of God is to adorn [people] with good character, to improve them with virtuous conduct and to regulate their interactions. The intention is this that beings who were veiled [from the light] might attain to the vision [of His Beauty] and that darksome reality might become filled with light.

As for the other commandments, they are derivatives of certitude, faith, assurance and mystical insight. Nevertheless, because this blessed cycle is the most mighty of divine dispensations, it encompasses all of the spiritual and physical aspects [of human life] (marátib-i rawhání va jismání) and is perfect in its power and sovereignty (quvvat va saltanat). Therefore those universal (all-encompassing) matters which are the foundations of the holy law (sharí'at) of God are revealed (mansús) [in the scriptures] and all secondary (subsidiary) matters (mutafarri`át) are to be referred to the House of Justice.

The wisdom of this is that time does not stand still. Change and alteration are among the specific and necessary conditions of contingent existence and of time and space. Therefore the House of Justice is able to act in accordance with the needs of the time (exigencies). It should not be thought that the House of Justice acts on the basis of its own thoughts and opinions. God forbid! The Universal (Most Mighty)

House of Justice (bayt al-`adl-i a`zam) will make its decisions and enact its laws through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (rúh al-quds), for it is under the guard, protection, and succour of the Ancient Beauty. Whatsoever it decides is obligatory, indisputable, necessary, and definitive for all. There is no recourse for anyone.

Say: O people! The Universal House of Justice is [sheltered] beneath the wing of your Lord, the Merciful, the Compassionate – that is to say, under His protection, His defence, His safe-keeping, and His guard. For He has ordered the believers and the assured ones to obey this goodly and pure group, this holy and victorious assemblage. Therefore its sovereignty is heavenly and divine and its laws (ahkám, ordinances) are inspired and spiritual.

Thus, this is the intention and the wisdom of referring social ordinances (ahkám-i madaniyyih) to the Universal House of Justice. In the holy law (shari`at) of Islam (Furqán), also, all of the laws were not revealed (mansús) [in the Qur`án]. Indeed, not one thousandth were revealed. Although all important matters were mentioned, yet one hundred thousand laws were not mentioned. Later the `ulama derived (istinbát) them according to the rules (qavá'id) of the [science of] the Principles [of Jurisprudence] (úsúl). In those early [schools] of law (shará`i), the individual members of the `ulama would derive (istinbát) these [laws] differently and they were implemented. Now, the [process of] deriving [the law] is to be referred to the House of Justice and the derivation (istinbát) and elicitation (istikhráj) of individual learned persons (`ulamá) has no authority, unless the House of Justice endorses it. The difference is just this that [from the derivations and endorsements of the House of Justice, whose members are elected and have the confidence of the generality of the community, no differences will arise, whereas] from the derivations (istinbát) of the members of the learned and wise comes about differences and this leads to sectarian splitting,

separation and division. The unity of discourse and the oneness of the religion of God would disappear and the foundations of the law (sharí'at) of God would be shaken.

As for the command to marry, this is entirely a social law (ahkám-i madanniyat). Despite this, its conditions are stipulated and its fundamentals are made clear in the law (sharí'at) of God. However, the marriage of near relatives is not revealed [in the scripture] (ghayr-i mansús). It is referred to the House of Justice, who will make decisions based on the principles of civilisation (qavá'id-i madaniyyat), the exigencies of medicine, wisdom, and the tendencies of human nature. There is no doubt that (marriage with) distant stock is closer to the principles of civilization, medicine, and nature, than with closely related peoples. And consider this observation: in Christian holy law (sharí'at), although marriage to near relatives (aqárib) was in fact permitted, in that its prohibition was not revealed [in scripture] (mansús), nevertheless, the early Christian councils prohibited the marriage of near relatives to seven degrees of separation (literally "seven generations" – i.e. those who have a common ancestor seven generations back). Moreover this is implemented in all of the sects of Christianity because this is purely a social (madaní) matter. Now anything the House of Justice decides in this matter, that is the definitive and decisive divine law. No-one may infringe it.

If you consider it, you will see how much this referral of social laws (ahkám-i madaniyyih) to the House of Justice is consistent with wisdom. For whenever a difficulty arises because a compelling circumstance has arisen, at that time, because the House of Justice has decided the previous ruling (qarár), a particular House of Justice can again, because of specific compelling circumstances, issue a new specific ruling for this particular case and circumstance, and thus the danger may be completely averted. For whatsoever the House of Justice has decreed, that it can also abrogate.

In Islam, there was also the matter of punishments that were not decreed in the holy law (ta`zír). These were referred to those in authority. Since there was no revealed law (nasúsi) about the extent of such punishments (ta`zír), it was determined by and dependant upon the whim (ra`y) of the person in power. And these punishments ranged from verbal censure to the death penalty. This is what government (siyásat) of the people of Islam mostly revolved around. In any case, the foundation of this mighty dispensation has been arranged in such a manner that its laws will be in accordance with and suitable for every age and time, unlike the holy laws (shará`i) of the past, the implementation of which are now suspended or impossible. For example, observe that the laws of the Torah are in no way capable of being implemented today, since there are ten capital offenses in it. Similarly, according to the holy law (shari`at) of Islam (Furqán), the hand is to be cut off for stealing ten dirhams. Now, is the implementation of such a law possible? No! By God! But this holy and divine law is compatible with all ages and centuries and the passing of time. "Thus have we made you a middle people, that you may be a witness unto the people and the Messenger may be a witness to you." (Qur`án 2:137)

The eloquent poetry and the consummate verses that have been composed with delectable contents should be recited and sung. Truly they are worthy of being chanted in the assemblies of divine unity. Upon you be glory. `A[bdu`l-Bahá] `A[bbás]

III. On the Functioning of the Universal House of Justice – some further comments

Having considered the translation of this important tablet of `Abdu`l-Bahá and demonstrated that far from limiting the Universal House of Justice to merely legislating on matters of "personal status laws," it in fact gives the House the authority to enact laws and decisions affecting social or "civilizational" matters (*ahkám madaniyyih*), we need now to consider the

effect that this has on the rest of Cole's argument. Cole has used his translation of this tablet as evidence for his assertion made frequently elsewhere that the phrase "*umúr siyásiyyih*" in the Tablet of Ishráqát does not mean "matters of state" as Shoghi Effendi has translated it, but in fact means "the administration of religious law."

Cole has argued that, in this tablet, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the jurisdiction of the Universal House of Justice extends to the "*ahkám madaniyyih*" and, translating this phrase as "personal status laws," contends that this supports his interpretation of the phrase "*umúr siyásiyyih*" as referring only to the administration of religious law. Having demonstrated above that Cole is incorrect in his interpretation of "*ahkám madaniyyih*," this not only cancels out Cole's argument in relation to the "*umúr siyásiyyih*," it also provides evidence against Cole's interpretation and supporting Shoghi Effendi's interpretation. If 'Abdu'l-Bahá regards the functions of the Universal House of Justice as including "*ahkám madaniyyih*" and this phrase should be interpreted as referring to social and civilisational laws, then this is evidence that "*umúr siyásiyyih*" in Ishráqát also refers to social and governmental matters and not just the administration of religious law, as Cole has argued.

Cole has argued that the words *siyásat* and *siyásiyyih* when used by Bahá'u'lláh do not have their modern meanings of politics and political. He states that these are a later meaning inappropriately imposed. He maintains that the real meaning of these words as used by Bahá'u'lláh relates to their medieval and early modern usage which comprises of two main sets of meaning: first, "the Greco-Islamic concept of leadership a la Aristotle"; second, "the Islamic juridical concept of *as-siyasah ash-shar'iyyah* (post-scriptural ordinances enacted by the community's authorities)." Of these two, Cole favours the second in this context because he holds that the reference by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to marriage laws (which are considered as part of *mu'ámalát* – religious law governing the relations between believers) and *ta'zír* (punishments that have not been defined in the scriptures) in this tablet that we are discussing means that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was using this term in the context of religious jurisprudence and therefore this second meaning in the correct

one. He then also argues that similarly because, in *Ishráqát*, Bahá'u'lláh introduces the term “*umúr siyásiyyih*” in the context of the words “*ibádát*” which is a technical term in religious jurisprudence that relates to “acts of worship,” therefore the term “*umúr siyásiyyih*” should also be restricted to the sphere of religious jurisprudence. Thus he claims that this means that the Houses of Justice should only be permitted to “administer religious law not specified in scripture” and not enter into “matters of state” as implied by Shoghi Effendi’s translation.

There are a number of comments that can be made about Cole’s position. Among them are the following:

1. In this tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that we are considering, we can see a progressive unfoldment by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá of His concept of the area that the Bahá’í Faith covers and the division of this area between the revealed text and the functions of the House of Justice. At the beginning of this tablet there is a mere hint when He declares that although the Bahá’í message is primarily a spiritual one, nevertheless this “greatest of all divine cycles” encompasses “the entirety of all (*jámi` jamí`-yi*) spiritual and physical (*rawhaní va jismání*) stages (or aspects or stations, *marátib*). He does not make any exceptions here — *jámi`-yi jamí`-yi* could be called a doubled emphatic — two words with the same meaning used to emphasise a point. He then later spells out that whatever matter arises that is not specifically revealed in the text should be referred to the Universal House of Justice. And finally He is quite explicit and completely clear that what He is referring to as being under the jurisdiction of the Universal House of Justice are the *ahkám-i madaniyyih* — laws and ordinances relating to social, civil or governmental matters.

2. As Cole has correctly stated in his commentary on this tablet, the Qur’án has relatively little law in it. In the matter of criminal law, only six offences are specified. Thus, again as Cole correctly points out: “In Islam, the authority to enact extra-scriptural ‘ordinances’ (*ahkám*) based on scriptural principle tended to be invested in the ruler in early centuries.” However, he then seems to imply that these ordinances are limited to just “the ethical and spiritual life or personal

status.” In fact, the ordinances (*ahkám*) of rulers in Islam cover all aspects of social and political life. Thus in this tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is decrying the situation in the Islamic world where ordinances and rulings covering social and political matters are subject to the individual interpretations of the ruling class. He states that in the Bahá’í Faith all such *ahkám-i madaniyyih* (social laws or ordinances) must be referred to the Universal House of Justice. Thus, according to this tablet, the *ahkám* that are referred to the House of Justice are not just matters relating to personal status or inter-personal relationships (i.e. the area of *mu’ámalát*), but rather all matters relating to civil and social issues (*madaniyyat*) – in other words the area normally regulated by the state. Thus ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s words in this tablet support Shoghi Effendi’s translation of *umúr-i siyásiyyih* as “matters of state.”

3. In his argument, Cole states that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has defined what He means by *siyásat* when He says that “This was, for the most part, the pivot of the administration of justice (*siyasat*) in the Muslim community.” As can be seen from the preceding translation, I have considered it better, given the context, to translate this as: “This is what government of the people of Islam mostly revolved around.” In any case, I do not see this sentence as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá defining what *siyásat* is, rather He is making an observation that much of the time of the rulers in the Islamic world was taken up with ruling on such matters.

Even if we do allow Cole’s interpretation of this sentence to stand, this statement by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá only defines *siyásat* in relation to the “people of Islam.” This must be seen in the context of the following sentence that starts “*bárfi*” which means “in any event,” “in any case” or “anyhow” – in other words this following sentence is being set up in opposition to the previous sentence: “In any case, the foundation of this mighty dispensation has been arranged in such a manner that its laws will be in accordance with and suitable for every age and time...” Thus even if we allow Cole’s limiting *siyása* to the administration of the religious law in Islam, the following sentence is saying that that situation does not hold in this, the Bahá’í dispensation. It is saying that, in the Bahá’í dispensation, *siyása* is different to *siyása* in Islam. So that however we define the word *siyása* for the Islamic world, it

does not necessarily follow that the same definition holds in the Bahá'í dispensation. The limits of *siyása* in the Bahá'í dispensation is mapped out by 'Abdu'l-Bahá through His use of the term *ahkám-i madaniyya* – laws relating to social or civil matters – a term clearly encompassing all aspects of human social life. In other words, regardless of what the limits of the term *siyása* were in the Islamic dispensation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá is here extending the limits of *siyása* in the Bahá'í dispensation to include all aspects of human social life. This wide meaning of the term *siyása* can then be transferred to the Ishráqát. Here Bahá'u'lláh is saying that matters of worship (*ÿbádát* – prayer, fasting, etc.) should be performed in accordance with the Scripture (i.e. the laws of the Aqdas), but *umúr-i siyásiyyih* (which we know from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's gloss to be equivalent to *ahkám-i madaniyyih* – laws and ordinances pertaining to social and civil matters) should be referred to the House of Justice. And we can be sure that Bahá'u'lláh in this passage is intending the same range of meaning that 'Abdu'l-Bahá intended in this tablet because Bahá'u'lláh uses precisely the same argument that 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses – that this is in order that these social ordinances should remain in accordance with changing human requirements.

Thus Bahá'u'lláh's usage, *umúr -i siyásiyyih*, here is perfectly in alignment with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's term *ahkám-i madaniyyih* and refers to those areas of human life that require social regulation. Now Shoghi Effendi's translation of Bahá'u'lláh's *umúr -i siyásiyyih* as "affairs of state" seems to me to fit well within this semantic range. In any civilised society ("civilised" being here used as meaning an urbanised society), there is need for communal regulation and therefore human beings have set up a state structure to regulate their affairs. At the head of this state structure is either an individual or a body of people whose function is to enact such communal and social regulations as may be required in order to allow human social life to continue in peace and prosperity, in order to allow civilization to develop and prosper. Thus those areas of human communal life that require regulation can be described in English as "affairs of state" and in Persian as *umúr-i siyásiyyih*; and for this regulation, they require the enactment of social ordinances – *ahkám-i madaniyyih*. Thus Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi's usages are all consistently within the

same range of meaning: that which should be referred to the House of Justice for their enactment of ordinances are those areas of human social life that require regulation in order for human civilization to continue; since it is the function of the state to regulate such areas of human life, these areas of human social life can be called “affairs of state.”

4. It is also of interest to look at the context in which the phrase “*umúr-i siyásiyyih*” occurs in the Ishráqát. In the very next passage, the ninth Ishráq, the following statement is made: “The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God’s holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world ... The progress of the world, the development of nations, the tranquillity of peoples, and the peace of all who dwell on earth are among the principles and ordinances of God.” Then a couple of sentences later, Bahá’u’lláh lists “the Trustees of the House of Justice” among the chiefs and rulers of the world — again this sounds very much as though Bahá’u’lláh envisages a political and governmental role for the House of Justice (provided the word “political” is understood in its sense of social administration and not in the sense of party politics).

On can also look at other statements that Bahá’u’lláh makes about Universal House of Justice. For example, in the Lawḥ-i Dunyá which dates to about the same period as the Ishráqát, it is made incumbent upon the “ministers of the House of Justice to promote the Lesser Peace so that the people of the earth may be relieved from the burden of exorbitant expenditures.” This sounds very much like a governmental role for the House of Justice.

5. Of course in considering this matter, it is useful to survey what exactly the words *siyása* and *siyásiyyih* have meant over a period of time, and specially in Islamic religious literature.

In the Qur’án, the words *siyása* and *siyásiyyih* do not occur. In the hadith literature, which is some of the earliest post-Qur’anic literature that we have, the word *siyásat* does occur in a tradition that is widely reported in the early and authoritative collections of al-Bukhári, Muslim and Ibn Hanbal (c. 9th century). In this Tradition the evident meaning of the word is “looking after.” A woman, the daughter of Abu Bakr, is

speaking about her household duties and her tending of a horse and at the end of the Tradition, she says:

(I continued serving in this way) till Abu Bakr sent me a servant to look after the horse (*siyásat al-faras*), whereupon I felt as if he had set me free. (Hadith in *Sahih Bukhári* – chapter of al-Nikah, hadith number 151 – 107 in some editions, 4823 in al-`Alamiyyih CD; also in *Sahih Muslim*, Kitáb as-Salám and *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal, no 25700, 25733).

This meaning of “looking after” can still be found in books from a much later period. In *Sharh Sahih Muslim* (in explanation of hadith 3429) by an-Nawawi (13th century AD), “*siyása*” is defined thus: “arising to do for a thing what is beneficial to it” (*al-qiyám `ala `sh-shay` bi-má yuslihu*). This same explanation can also be found in *Sharh Sunan Ibn Majah* by al-Sindí (d. 1138; in explanation of hadith 2862).

However, this function of “looking after” people is so closely connected with the function of leadership that, in many passages, it is difficult to tell whether “looking after” or “leadership over” is the more appropriate translation. Thus in the *Fath al-Barí bi-Sharh Sahih al-Bukharí* by Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalání (d. 1449), the following occurs: “knowledge (*al-ilm*) here is knowledge of *siyása* (leadership of / looking after) of the people according to the Book of God and the Sunna of the Messenger of God.” (Hadith 3405) In the same work, in discussing the two words *Rabb* and *Sayyid* as names of God, the author cites al-Khattábi as defining *sayáda* as “leadership (*riyása*) over anyone who is beneath him and *siyása lahu* (authority has been given to him over them?), and looking after their affairs well (*husnu tadbír li amrihi*).” (Hadith 2366)

In the *Tuhfat al-Ahwadhi bi Sharh Jami` at-Tirmidhi* by al-Mubarakfuri (d.1935) also, *siyasa* is used in contexts where it could equally well mean “looking after” or “leadership” as attested by the following quotation (in explanation of hadith 2100): “The tyranny of the Sultan spread over all who are *tahta siyasiatih* (beneath his authority/under his care).”

However, I am sure that Cole would agree that the best way of determining what *siyása* and *siyásiyyih* meant in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and `Abdu'l-Bahá is to examine further examples of how They use the word in different places in Their

writings. After all, it really does not matter much how other people at other times used these words. If we can discern from a close examination of the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and His close circle, which would include of course 'Abdu'l-Bahá (especially His writings from as close to the time of Bahá'u'lláh as possible), how They used these words, then that would be the best way of determining what "*umúr-i siyásiyyih*" means in the *Ishráqát*.

Firstly, this same phrase *umúr-i siyásiyyih*, set within the same sentence occurs also in the *Bishárát* (the 13th glad tidings), but since the context is exactly the same, this occurrence does not assist us.

Both in the *Bishárát* and the *Ishráqát*, these passage start with the statement that: *umúr-i millat mu'allaq ast bi rijál-i bayt-i 'adl-i iláhí*, which is translated in the official translation as: "*The men of God's House of Justice have been charged with the affairs of the people.*" Cole has argued that here Bahá'u'lláh uses *millat* in its technical Ottoman sense of a religious community (in line with his contention that *siyásí* refers to the administration of religious law). However, even if Cole does argue along these lines for this particular passage, he cannot deny other passages where *siyásah* and *siyásí* are relative to *'álam* (the world) and *nás* (people) rather than *millat*. For example, in the *Lawḥ-i Hikmat* (Tablet of Wisdom), which dates to the same period as the *Ishráqát*, there is the following passage, in which I have inserted transliteration into the official translation:

Say: The beginning of Wisdom and the origin thereof is to acknowledge whatsoever God hath clearly set forth, for through its potency the foundation of statesmanship (*bunyán as-siyásah*), which is a shield for the preservation of the body of mankind (*badan al-'álam*), hath been firmly established. Ponder a while that ye may perceive what My most exalted Pen hath proclaimed in this wondrous Tablet. Say, every matter related to state affairs (*kullu amrin siyásiyyin*) which ye raise for discussion falls under the shadow of one of the words sent down from the heaven of His glorious and exalted utterance (TB 151)

Here the foundation of *siyásah* is stated to be a shield for the protection of the whole world – not just that of a specific religious community – the Bahá’í community.

In another passage in the *Lawḥ-i Maqsúd* (which again dates from the late ‘Akka period), *siyásat* occurs several times, once linked to *nufús-i álam* (souls of the world) and once to *nás* (people) but not to *millat*. In this passage, it is again clear that *siyásat* refers to temporal, governmental affairs, and not to the administration of religion law, because the *ámir* (temporal ruler) is addressed. This word *ámir* refers to the secular authority and it would be unusual to find it designating a religious leader. Perhaps even more significant is the use of the phrase *siyásat-i ‘álam* – indicating that what is being spoken of is “the government of the whole world” and not that of a specific religious community. Again I have inserted transliteration into the official translation:

God grant that the people of the world (nufús-i ‘álam) may be graciously aided to preserve the light of His loving counsels within the globe of wisdom. We cherish the hope that everyone (kull) may be adorned with the vesture of true wisdom, the basis of the government of the world (ass-i asás-i siyásat-i ‘álam).

The Great Being saith: The heaven of statesmanship (ásmán-i siyásat) is made luminous and resplendent by the brightness of the light of these blessed words which hath dawned from the dayspring of the Will of God: It behoveth every ruler (li-kulli ámirin) to weigh his own being every day in the balance of equity and justice and then to judge between men and counsel them to do that which would direct their steps unto the path of wisdom and understanding. This is the cornerstone of statesmanship and the essence thereof (ass-i siyásat va asl-i án) ... The secrets of statesmanship (asrár-i siyásat) and that of which the people (nás) are in need lie enfolded within these words. (TB 166-67)

Not surprisingly, the main place to which we should look for the meaning of *siyása* and *siyásiyyih* in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s writings is in the *Risálih-yi Siyásiyyih* (Treatise on Leadership or Politics). This is not only because these words figure in the title

and frequently in the text of this work, but also because the work itself is dated to about the same period of time as the *Isshráqát* and thus accurately reflects the usage of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá at this time. The *Isshráqát* dates from the late 'Akká period of Bahá'u'lláh's life, while the *Risalih-yi Siyásiyyih* can be dated to about 1892 because of the historical references in it.

The following are some passages in which Cole himself has translated *umúr siyásí* as "political affairs" – I am here citing Cole's own translation (<http://www.h-net.org/bahai/trans/vol2/absiyasi.htm>) and merely inserting some transliteration of the text:

Toward the end of the dynasty of the Safavid kings [1501-1722], may they rest in peace, the religious leaders (*'ulamá*) sought influence over the political affairs (*umúr-i siyásí*) of Iran.

This was the fruit of the interference in political affairs (*umúr-i siyásí*) of religious leaders and of those accomplished in the unassailable revealed law.

On another occasion, at the beginning of the reign of Aqa Muḥammad Khan [Qajar, r. 1785-1797], the religious leaders of the people once again interjected themselves into political affairs (*umúr siyásí*), and thereby covered Iran's peoples with the dust of abasement.

Praise be to God! Shall persons who are unable to manage or train up their own households, who are wholly uninformed both with regard to domestic and foreign affairs, interfere in the proceedings of the kingdom and its subjects, or intervene in the intricacies of political matters (*umúr siyásí*)?

Were you to refer to history, you would find innumerable, and, indeed, infinite numbers of such occurrences, the cause of which in every instance was the interference of religious leaders (*ru'asá-yi dín*) in political affairs (*umúr siyásiyyih*).

Otherwise, what expertise do they have in political matters (*umúr siyásí*), the protection of the subjects, the managing of serious affairs, the welfare and prosperity of the country, the implementation of the civil regulations and secular laws of a realm, or foreign affairs and domestic policy?

If Cole were to object that the *Risálíh-yi Siyásiyyih* dates from after the *Ishráqát* (and this would be an unfair objection since this tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that he is citing as support for his position is from long after even the *Siyásiyyih*), then we can look at the *Risálíh-yi Madaniyyih* (Secret of Divine Civilization). This book was written in about 1875 and thus preceded the *Ishráqát*. Here we find *siyásiyyih* or *siyásí* being used consistently as an adjective to denote “political” or “governmental” (I have given the Marzieh Gail translation, Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990, below with added transliteration and notes as to possible alternative translations):

The greatest of the world’s philosophers marveled at the wisdom of her government, and her political system (*qavánín siyásiyyih-ash*) became the model for all the kings of the four continents then known.” *Qavánín siyásiyyih-ash* would perhaps be more accurately rendered as “governmental laws,” but it is difficult to see how *siyásiyyih* could mean anything other than “political,” “state” or “governmental” here.

Another maintains that only such measures should be adopted as the Persians themselves devise, that they themselves should reform their political administration (*isláhát lázimih siyásiyyih*) and their educational system and the state of their culture and that there is no need to borrow improvements from other nations.” *Isláhát lázimih siyásiyyih* would be more literally translated as “the necessary political reforms.”

The state (*‘álam-i siyásí*) is, moreover, based upon two potent forces, the legislative and the executive.” *‘Álam-i siyásí* could be translated “the state” or “the political sphere” or the “the body politic.” Clearly it is not referring to the religious sphere.

The world of politics (*'álam-i siyásí*) is like the world of man; he is seed at first, and then passes by degrees to the condition of embryo and foetus ... Just as this is a requirement of creation and is based on the universal Wisdom, the political world (*'álam-i siyásí*) in the same way cannot instantaneously evolve from the nadir of defectiveness to the zenith of rightness and perfection. Rather, qualified individuals must strive by day and by night, using all those means which will conduce to progress, until the government and the people (*dawlat va millat*) develop along every line from day to day and even from moment to moment.

Another work of 'Abdu'l-Bahá dates from the same period as the writing of the *Ishráqát*. This is the *Traveller's Narrative* (written 1886). So we can expect it to reflect accurately the same range of meaning that words in the *Ishráqát* have. Interestingly the phrase *umúr siyásiyyih* appears in this text and E.G. Browne has translated the relevant passage thus: "It is right to exercise caution and care with regard to political factions (*ahzáb-i siyásí*), and to be fearful and apprehensive of materialist sects; for the subjects occupying the thoughts of the former are [designs of] interference in political matters (*umúr-i siyásiyyih*)..." It can clearly be seen from the context that the translation "political" is correct here and any translation related to "ordinances by a post-revelational authority" would be nonsense.

In numerous tablets, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statements regarding the principle of Bahá'ís not meddling in political affairs is phrased using exactly the same phrase of *umúr-i siyásí* or *umúr-i siyásiyyih*; for example, in the *Traveller's Narrative* which as we have seen is more or less contemporaneous with the *Ishráqát*, we find two successive sentences in which *umúr siyásiyí* is made the cognate of *umúr-i hukúmat* (governmental affairs). I give here E.G. Browne's translation:

If so be that His Majesty the King will investigate matters in his own noble person, it is believed that it will become clear before his presence that this sect have no worldly object nor any concern with political matters (*umúr-i siyásí*). The fulcrum of their motion and rest and the pivot of their cast and conduct is

restricted to spiritual things and confined to matters of conscience; it has nothing to do with the affairs of government (*umúr-i hukúmat*) nor any concern with the powers of the throne. (*Traveller's Narrative*, vol. 2, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1891, p. 156)

Clearly then E.G. Browne, a man who was intimately familiar with word usages in late 19th century Iran, in translating a work of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that is almost exactly contemporaneous with the *Ishráqát*, thought the correct translation of *umúr-i siyásiyyih* was "political matters."

In a tablet dating probably to the period of the Young Turk Revolution:

... [My] intention is this that you should make the officials of the everlasting Ottoman government understand to the extent that they ought that the party of God (*hizb Alláh*) does not meddle at all in political affairs (*umúr-i siyásiyyih*). They are forbidden to do his according to the irrefutable text [of their scripture]. And if any person from among this people does meddle in political affairs (*umúr-i siyasî*), the others should keep their distance from him that haply he may repent ... meddling in political affairs (*umúr siyasî*) ends in regret; it is of no benefit or help; it is necessary to keep away from all parties (*ahzáb*). (*Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, 8 vols., vols. 1-3 Cairo, 1910-22, vols. 4-8 Tihran: Mu'assisih Millí Mabú'at Amrí, 121-34 B.E./1964-1977, vol. 4, pp. 71-2)

... Obey those in authority (*awliyá-yi umúr*) and do not meddle in political affairs (*umúr-i siyasî*) (*Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 3, p. 254)

... That spiritual assembly must not raise opposition in political matters (*umúr-i siyasî*) which are under the jurisdiction of the local government (*hukúmat-i mahallí*). They should not even breathe one word of political matters (*umúr-i siyasî*). (*Makátib-i 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, vol. 3, p. 507)

In a letter, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá probably wrote in about 1902-3 to Mírzá 'Alí Akbar Nakhjavání that with regard to Count Tolstoy, Nakhjavání should write to him and send him some suitable translated tablets, "but not in such a way that

the Russian Government would think that you are in league and co-operating with him, even in meddling in political affairs (*umúr-i siyásat*), for the afore-mentioned Count is very much involved in political affairs (*umúr-i siyásí*). (*Ma'idih Asmání*, 9 vols., Tehran: Mu'assisih Millí Matbú'át Amrí, 121-29 B.E./1964-1972, vol. 9, p. 40). Of course, no-one would try to maintain that Tolstoy's activities could be described as "ordinances by a post-revelational authority."

And concerning an individual who was very much involved in Persian politics, Mírzá Malkum Khan, 'Abdu'l-Bahá starts a tablet written shortly after Mírzá Malkum Khan's death in 1908: "In this world, a thousand politicians (*siyásiyyún*) have come and gone and have spread abroad upon the earth many important publications (*nashriyyát*), but now we do not find any mention or trace of them. Mírzá Malkam Khan (upon him be mercy and contentment) brought out political publications (*nashriyyát siyásí*) for fifty years ... (*Ma'idih Asmání*, vol. 9, pp. 143-4). Now anyone who knows anything about Persian history and Malkam Khan will know that his activities were purely political and had nothing to do with "ordinances by a post-revelational authority," thus there can be no reasonable doubt about the intended sense of the word *siyásí* here.

Thus we can find plenty of evidence that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá were using these terms to relate to what we could call "affairs of state" or "governmental affairs." Cole quite rightly points out that to translate *siyása* and *siyásiyyih* as referring to "politics" and "political" would probably not convey the correct intention of the word in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh. These words are for us at the beginning of the 21st century inextricably bound up with party politics and the manoeuvrings of politicians. The words *siyása* and *siyásiyyih* derived however, as we have seen above, from the sense of looking after others and hence leadership. It thus came to mean, in the autocratic states of the Middle East, the ruler's function of leadership and looking after his subjects and his state. "*Umúr-i siyásiyyih*" can thus be translated as "governmental affairs" or "political affairs" (provided this latter is understood in its sense of the administration of a state and not in the sense of party politics) or indeed as Shoghi Effendi has translated it "affairs of state."

6. Cole brings forward, in his discussion of the contents of this tablet (e-mail of 12 January 2001), an argument from Abdu'l-Bahá's *Risáliyyih-yi Siyásiyyih* (the Treatise on Leadership or Politics) to support his contention that the House of Justice should restrict itself to "personal status regulations and ethics within the Bahá'í community." He maintains that in this treatise 'Abdu'l-Bahá "made it clear that the civil sphere and the religious sphere would always remain completely separate; and that religious leaders were not to intervene in civil government except when they were actively asked for their views by politicians." I do not want to get into the "separation of church and state" argument which has been rehearsed at length previously in several places. It would be sufficient for the purpose of this discussion to say that I think that to try to superimpose American ideas of the separation of church and state upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ideas as put forward in the *Risáliyyih-yi Siyásiyyih* is a mistake. In this treatise 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives an account of several historical occasions in which religious leaders in Iran have intervened in political affairs with disastrous consequences. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's conclusion from this is that the clerical class should not intervene in politics. It would be a misrepresentation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to map this conclusion of His directly and in an un-nuanced way onto the situation in the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith does not have a clerical class. It has no religious professionals who are trained in religious colleges. Therefore it does not have that class of people whose participation in politics 'Abdu'l-Bahá was decrying in the *Risáliyyih-yi Siyásiyyih*. Leadership in the Bahá'í Faith is given to councils of people elected from among the ordinary believers for limited terms of office and does not therefore represent the sort of professional religious leadership to which 'Abdu'l-Bahá is referring. Thus it is not appropriate to bring that position of 'Abdu'l-Bahá into this discussion.

I would also take issue with the characterisation of this view of the functioning of the Universal House of Justice as a "theocratic reading" (e-mail of 12 Jan 2001). This word is generally used very loosely. Its strict meaning, "rule by God," can only be a faith-based theological assertion, which would be quite unverifiable objectively and which would have no place in an academic historical or sociological work. However, the

word “theocracy” is usually loosely used to refer to rule by a priesthood or clerical class – a meaning that would be more accurately rendered by the word “hierocracy” – rule by a priesthood or sacred class. In any case, as I have stated above, the Bahá’í Faith does not have a clerical class. Its leadership by institutions elected from among the ordinary rank-and-file of the members of the religion with no specialised religious training cannot be classed as a hierocracy or theocracy.

Moreover, theocracies/hierocracies have a number of features that are not shared by the Bahá’í institutions:

1. Hierocratic/theocratic governments tend to be unelected and answerable to no-one. Bahá’í institutions are elected and hence must seek, at present every year (or every five years in the case of the Universal House of Justice), a further mandate from their electorate.
2. Hierocratic/theocratic governments tend to give a higher rank or status to those who are members of the clerical class, and hence members of the ruling class. They, as individuals, have rights and privileges over the ordinary believers and members of society. Bahá’u’lláh has clearly stated in several places, but most specifically in the Tablet of Unity (Lawḥ-i Ittihád) that all of the Bahá’ís are to consider themselves as being of one rank. No-one has individual leadership. Leadership belongs to the institutions of the Bahá’í Faith, acting as institutions (i.e. not their individual members). Thus members of the Bahá’í institutions should not be regarded as members of a ruling class that has any rights or privileges over the ordinary believers.
3. Moreover the functioning of these Bahá’í institutions does not replicate that typical of theocratic/hierocratic institutions. It is true that Bahá’í institutions like theocratic/hierocratic ones base their decisions on their scriptures. However, the Bahá’í scriptures contain mainly general ethical principles rather than detailed laws and are thus in practice rarely prescriptive in any given situation. In their decision-making, therefore, members of Bahá’í institutions are acting on their own sense of right and wrong (as guided by general ethical principles)

rather than applying a prescriptive Holy Law. Thus they are functioning more like the members of a modern democratic institution than a theocracy/hierocracy.

4. Furthermore, in practice, most theocracies/hierocracies are very much wedded to the respective cumulative tradition of their religion for a basis on which to make rulings and ordinances. In Islam for example, the concept of *ijma'* (which refers to the consensus of what Muslims have generally accepted in the past) acts as a powerful conservative restraint on the introduction of new ideas. Seldom can a new interpretation make its way past the deadening effect of this cumulative tradition into general acceptance by Muslims. Bahá'í institutions are not at all bound by the decisions of previous Bahá'í institutions, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear in this very tablet that we are considering.

Thus on theoretical and sociological grounds, it is incorrect to characterize the functioning of Bahá'í institutions as theocratic or hierocratic.

E-mail correspondence after posting of the paper

Following the publication of this paper on H-Bahai, Cole wrote an e-mail replying to the point that I had made. The following is an e-mail that I wrote in response. Excerpts from his prior email are interspersed with my responses.

In a message dated 25 Aug 2002, Dr Juan Cole writes:

This issue has nothing to do with Moojan himself, but I would like to point out that the full text of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's letter on the House of Justice and jurisprudence, as well as the full text of the Treatise on Leadership, has never after his death been published by any Bahá'í authority and both remain largely unknown, except for snippets, in the Iranian Bahá'í community. I suspect that these texts by 'Abdu'l-Bahá have been deliberately suppressed by a faction of Iranian Bahá'í theocrats, because they are strongly anti-theocratic in tenor and represent challenges to that faction's entrenched ideology. Had it not been for my publication and translation activities at

H-Bahai, perhaps even Moojan would not have had access to the complete text.

Dr Cole is quite right when he says that he drew my attention to this tablet, but it is not correct to imply that the Bahá'í institutions were somehow trying to conceal it. Did I not give references to two places where the original text of all of the substantive part of the tablet is published — in *Rahiq Makhtum* and *Amr va Khalq*? Furthermore an English translation of a substantial part of this has been published several times, once in *Wellsprings of Guidance*, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969, pp. 84-6, once in *Bahá'í News* no. 426 (Sep. 1966), p. 2, and once in the compilation "The Establishment of the Universal House of Justice" which was printed by the British Bahá'í Publishing Trust in 1984 (pp. 11-12) and reprinted in *Compilation of Compilations*, 2 vols. [Sydney]: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991, vol. 1, pp. 323-4. This is hardly a case of "never after his death been published by any Bahá'í authority." Nor does not this seem to me to be the actions of "Iranian Bahá'í theocrats" trying to suppress a text or of Bahá'í institutions frightened by the challenge it represents. Could the explanation be that no-one else sees any "anti-theocratic" tenor in the tablet?

I continue to think that something like "personal status laws" best translates what 'Abdu'l-Bahá has in mind by *ahkam-i madaniyyih*. "Social laws" is incorrect because it is too broad. For instance, a law about whether young persons must spend two years in the armed forces of a state would be a "social law" and yet it is *clearly* not the sort of thing about which 'Abdu'l-Bahá is talking here. When he gives examples of the *ahkam-i madaniyyih*, they are things like whether someone can marry a first cousin or the *hudúd*/ limitations on behavior, which in Islam treat illicit sex, slander about the latter, theft, wine bibbing, armed robbery and apostasy. Marriage, adultery, slander, drinking and apostasy are not broadly speaking "social" laws, but rather concern morality and personal status. Only theft and armed robbery have wider implications, but in early Islamic society concerned civil obligations among tribesmen and even in the US these can be the basis of private civil suits as well as of state criminal prosecution.

That is, the concrete examples 'Abdu'l-Bahá gives in this Tablet should take precedence over philological concerns with the ultimate origins of the word *madani*, and almost all of those concrete examples pertain to personal status law.

What Dr Cole appears to be saying is that in this tablet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá gives two examples of what he is talking about: one of these is marriage law which can be contained within the term “personal-status laws,” the other relates to the punishment for crimes which is clearly not “personal-status laws” but we will lump both in under the rubric of “personal-status laws” anyway. This seems illogical to me, especially when the actual meaning (i.e. the dictionary definition) of the words *ahkam-i madaniyyih* is “social law” which would fit both of these examples perfectly well.

In fact if one looks carefully at the tablet one will see that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá claims that the Bahá’í Faith encompasses “the entirety of all (*jámi’ jamí’-yi*) spiritual and physical (*rawhání va jismání*) stages (or aspects or stations, *marátib*.” And this broad comprehensive sweep of every spiritual and physical matter is broken down into two areas: there are those areas that are dealt with in the revealed text and then everything else which must be referred to the House of Justice. So Cole is quite right in saying that “social laws” is broad, but then ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is making a broad sweep here.

Incidentally, there is nothing in the text to indicate that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was intending to limit His definition of *ahkám-i madaniyyih* by the two examples He gives. He is giving these examples to show what has happened in the past because the range of revealed legislation in previous religions has been too narrow and the followers of these religions had to interpret for themselves. His intention in giving these examples is to demonstrate the comprehensiveness of this revelation because everything that is not covered in the revealed text can be referred to the Universal House of Justice — even whether “young persons must spend two years in the armed forces of a state” (if, for example, this was a matter of an appeal on the grounds of human rights and the government of the state concerned accepted the rulings of the House of Justice).

Let’s talk about what the word “*madaniyyih*.” meant to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as that seems the pertinent question to be resolved here. The most obvious place to look first is the *Risálih-yi Madaniyyih* (*The Secret of Divine Civilization*). What is this book about? It is certainly not about “laws of personal status.” It is precisely as the title is translated — about the causes and impulses that bring about true civilisation. *Risálih-yi Madaniyyih* must incidentally have been either given or approved by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the title of the book since He refers to the book by that title in other tablets. From this and the following quotations it will be clear that “*madaniyyih*” meant “civilization” for

'Abdu'l-Bahá. In the book itself, the word *madaniyyih* and its derivatives occur numerous times. Just a couple will be cited here as I do not think that anyone can seriously doubt that throughout this book 'Abdu'l-Bahá is speaking about "civilization" and not "personal status laws" (I have altered the translation to make it more literal):

Did not these new systems and procedures and enterprises of civilization (*madaniyyih*), contribute to the advancement of those countries? Were the people of Europe harmed by the adoption of such measures? Or did they rather by these means reach the highest degree of material development? (Text, 4th ed., Hofheim: Bahá'í-Verlag, 1984, p. 17; trans. p. 13)

It has now been clearly and irrefutably shown that the importation from foreign countries of the principles and procedures of civilization (*usúl va qavánín-i madaniyyat*), and the acquisition from them of sciences and techniques — in brief, of whatsoever will contribute to the general good — is entirely permissible. (Text pp. 38-9, trans. pp. 31-32)

Thus we have evidence that from long before this 1899 tablet, in *The Secret of Divine Civilization* (dated 1875), *madaniyyih* had a meaning related to "civilization." We can also point to a lengthy tablet that is addressed to the Bahá'ís of both the East and the West and must therefore date from after the 1899 tablet. This a tablet by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which he recaps many of the themes of *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. I found it first in *Ma'adih Asmani* vol. 5, p. 109-10 and began translating it and then realised that it had already been translated in *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1978, no. 225, p. 283. So below I have based the translation on that in *Selections* but in places have replaced this translation with a more literal one:

Two calls to success and prosperity are being raised from the heights of the happiness of mankind ... The one is the call of civilization (*nidá-yi madaniyyat*), of the progress of the material world (*taraqí-yi `álam-i tabí`at*). This pertains to the nether world (*jahán-i násút*), promotes the principles of material progress (*taraqiyát-i jismániyyih*), and is the trainer for the physical accomplishments of mankind. It comprises the laws, regulations, arts and sciences through which the world of humanity has developed ... The propagator and executive power of this call is just government (*hukúmat-i `ádilih*).

The other is the soul-stirring call of God, Whose spiritual teachings are safeguards of the everlasting glory ... Its penetrative power is the Word of God.

However, until the progress of civilisation (*taraqiyát-i madaní*), physical accomplishments (*kamálát-i jismání*) and human virtues are reinforced by spiritual perfections, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained. For however much happiness may be obtained on the one hand from the progress of civilization (*taraqiyát-i madaniyyih*) and the adornment of this physical world (*`álam-i jismání*) ... on the other hand it also brings dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions.

Consequently, when you look at the orderly pattern of kingdoms, cities and villages, with the attractiveness of their adornments, the freshness of their natural resources, the refinement of their appliances, the ease of their means of travel, the extent of knowledge available about the world of nature, the great inventions, the colossal enterprises, the noble discoveries and scientific researches, you would conclude that civilization (*madaniyyat*) is conducive to the happiness and the progress of the human world. But if you should look to the invention of destructive and infernal machines, to the development of forces of demolition and the invention of fiery implements, which uproot the tree of life, it would become evident and manifest to you that civilization (*madaniyyat*) is conjoined with barbarism. Progress and barbarism go hand in hand, unless material civilization (*madaniyyat-i jismániyyih*) be confirmed by Divine Guidance, by the revelations of the All-Merciful and by godly virtues, and be reinforced by spiritual conduct, by the ideals of the Kingdom and by the outpourings of the Realm of Might.

Consider now, that the most advanced and civilized (*mutamaddin*) countries of the world have been turned into arsenals of explosives ... (there are several more occurrence of the word *madaniyyih* but this extract is already long enough)

As can be seen from this quotation, *madaniyyih* is clearly linked here to the progress of the material world and its promotion is considered

to be the function of the government. Humanity is warned however that unless this physical civilisation goes hand-in-hand with spiritual values, destruction will be the consequence. *Madaniyyat* is here linked to “the invention of destructive and infernal machines, to the development of forces of demolition and the invention of fiery implements, which uproot the tree of life.” Clearly nothing here would induce one to think that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is referring to “laws of personal status.” (There are also significant references here to *jismání* which is contrasted to the spiritual — a subject to which we will return anon.)

In a talk given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London in September 1911 (text in *Khatabat*, 3 vols. Cairo, 1340 A.H., vol. 1, p. 51 — I was unable to find a published translation), He speaks about the effects of the coming of Moses upon the Israelites. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says: “He made them masters of the sciences and arts and prepared for them a comprehensive civilisation (*madaniyyih-yi tám*). He spread among them the treasure-houses of the world of humanity” — clearly not a reference to “personal status laws.”

Similarly, when in a tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is referring to the progress made by the Arabs under the influence of Muhammad, He writes: “All of them united and in harmony strove for the advancement of civilization (*taraqiyyát-yi madaniyyih*). They escaped from the utmost abasement and achieved eternal glory. Can any social causation more powerful than this exist in the world?” (*Makátib* vol. 3, p. 62)

In fact I can find no occurrence of *madaniyyih* or *madaniyyat* where ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is imposing on this word the narrow definition that Cole would like here.

In this Tablet, in my view ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is speaking entirely about the former situation, millet law, which is why I give it as personal status law. He is saying that in the Bahá’í faith millet law — which applies only to Bahá’ís — derives from the Bahá’í scriptures but is codified, expanded and administered by the houses of justice. There was also a move in the Ottoman empire to put the administration of millet law and affairs in the hands of elected councils from the new middle class instead of in those of the clergy, and there were riots about this sort of issue among members of the Armenian and Eastern Orthodox millets, of which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was well aware. His and Bahá’u’lláh’s displacement of clerics or religious jurists by elected houses of justice was in accord with the most progressive legal ideas of the late Ottoman empire.

Again Cole appears to be intent on narrowing the range of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s terminology when in fact, the text of the tablet gives a broad range to what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is saying.

If one looks at the tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the word *millat* occurs most frequently in association with *dawlat* — i.e. the government and the people. Here people does not mean the members of one particular religious community, but rather all of the people who are the subjects of that government.

Among the main linguistic bases of contemporary Bahá’í theocratic thought in Persian is a misreading of the word “siyasat” to mean “politics” in the modern sense, and shunting aside its earlier or more technical meanings, which are the ones usually assigned it by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. I have admitted that it can mean leadership in the Aristotelian sense, but not in a jurisprudential context. It is true that at some point Arabs and Iranians did begin using the word *siyasat* (*al-siyasah*) as a neologism for “politics.” But in the 1890s when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s contemporaries wanted to talk about politics in the European sense, they said “pulitik,” transliterating from French.

But the fact is that Abdu’l-Bahá and Bahá’u’lláh never use the word “*púlítik*.” And when Abdu’l-Bahá wants to speak about what we would now call politics (e.g. when He is prohibiting interference in political affairs), He uses the term *umúr siyá siyyih*.

Actually, Persians and Arabs in the 1890s were already using *siyása* in the sense of the government and social administration which is what the word means when Bahá’u’lláh and Abdu’l-Bahá use it. Thus for example there is the following from Butrus Bustani’s *Muhit al-Muhit* which was published in 1870. This is a very literal translation of the entry for *as-siyása al-madaniyya*: (I am grateful to Will McCants for this reference):

“*as-siyása al-madaniyya* is the management [*tadbír*] of the way of living [*ma`ásh*] with [*ma`*] the public [*al-`umúm*] according to the norms [*`ala sunan*] of justice [*al-`adl*] and righteousness [*al-istiqa`ma*]. It is one of the divisions of practical wisdom [*al-hikma al-`amaliyya*] and is called “*al-hikma as-siyásiyya*,” “*`ilm as-siyása*,” “*siyásat al-mulk*,” and “*al-hikma al-madaniyya*.” The *Kitáb as-Siyása* which Aristotle wrote for Alexander contains the important aspects of this science.”

The entry draws on a long history of the word in Muslim political philosophy, starting with al-Farabi’s *as-Siyása al-Madaniyya*,

translated as “On political government” (see entry on al-Farabi in *Encyclopædia of Islam*, 2nd ed., EI2). Also see “Hikma” in EI2 on the division between theoretical and practical wisdom. But the main point is that these words *siyása* and *madaniyya* clearly had connotations of more than just leadership — they had connotations of government, which is exactly how Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá are using them.

Moojan has made a basic error of translation here. Words have meanings according to their context. In this context, *siyasat* simply cannot mean “government.” The entire phrase is this: “In Islam, as well, administrative punishments (*ta`zir*) were the purview of the ruling authority. There were no scriptural texts specifying the levels of punishment. It depended on the ruler. Such punishments ranged from verbal censure to death. This was, for the most part, the pivot of the administration of justice (*siyasat*) in the Muslim community.” The question is, what is the referent of the pronoun “this”? We have here a copula. on one side is *siyasat* in the Muslim community. What is it being equated to? It is obvious. “The dependence of the level of punishment on the will of the ruler.” That isn't government in general. It is the administration of justice in particular.

Actually I think the entry in Bustani's dictionary is pertinent here. I gave in my paper examples of the evolution of the term *siyasa* in Islamic history and showed that it initially meant mainly looking after people — or *tadbír* as Bustani has. This is the meaning that would make most sense here: “This is what looking after the people of Islam involved.”

The apparent contradiction between the following two passages —

[1] “You asked about the wisdom of putting the house of justice in charge of important ordinances. First of all, this divine cycle is solely spiritual, full of godly compassion, and is a matter of conscience. It has no connection at all to physical, material, or worldly matters. In the same way, the Christian dispensation was purely spiritual. “

and

[2] “Nevertheless, this blessed cycle is the greatest of divine dispensations, and for this reason, it encompasses spiritual aspects and aspects of the spiritual body, and is perfect in its power and authority. Therefore, the universal precepts that

form the foundation of the religious law are expressly stated in the text. “

— remains the same whether the first “physical” was *jasadi* or *jismani*. I continue to think that my solution, which is that “physical” has two distinct connotations in Shaykhi-Bábí-Bahá’í thought, helps resolve the apparent problem. By the way, there are passages in which Bahá’u’lláh refers to Shaykh Ahmad’s distinctions among the various sorts of body, the physical body and the spiritual body.

It would certainly strengthen Cole’s argument if he could cite some instances of this but I have not found any. The lengthy extract from *Má’adih Asmání* vol. 5, p. 109-10 I have cited above also points to a very physical meaning of *jismání* — which Abdu’l-Bahá there uses as a contrast to the spiritual.

What Cole appears to be saying then is that Abdu’l-Bahá uses this word *jismání* in two diametrically opposite meanings in the same tablet — without signalling at all that he is doing this.

Now I am sure that when Shaykh Ahmad uses the word *jism* to mean something opposite to what is the usual meaning of this word, he clearly signals that that is what he is doing. And I am sure that Abdu’l-Bahá, if He had meant *jismání* in the opposite to its usual sense would have clearly signalled this within that sentence. Otherwise, if the same word can be ascribed meanings which are the opposite of each other and there is no signalling of this, the result is cognitive anarchy. Now sometimes poor writers are guilty of this but Abdu’l-Bahá is an exceptionally clear and good writer and would never inflict such a thing on His readers.

I fear this interpretation turns the text on its head. What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is saying is that the houses of justice have *only* spiritual authority (*saltanatuha malakutiyyah*), *not* temporal or worldly authority, which is the purview of the civil State. Otherwise, the modifier “*malakutiyyah*” or ‘other-worldly’ would not be necessary, and he would just have spoken of their ‘sovereignty’ pure and simple. He doesn’t say the *origin* of the authority of Bahá’í institutions is spiritual, he says its *nature* is.

I think not. The reason is the connecting word “*fa*” which means “and so.” Therefore what follows is a consequence of what has gone before. What has gone before are statements that the House of Justice is under the wing of the protection of God and that its

decisions are inspired by the Holy Spirit. What follows then must be a consequence of these statements. This would only be the case if we interpret what follows thus: And so its sovereignty is heavenly and divine (because the House of Justice is under the wing of the protection of God) and its laws are inspired and spiritual (because the laws are inspired by the Holy Spirit).

He uses the same words (ruh, vujdan) here as are invoked at the beginning of the Tablet on the Universal House of Justice and Jurisprudence, and underlines that “the leaders of religions must not intervene in political affairs” whereas it is praiseworthy of individual members of religions to become involved in public service. The common Bahá'í theocratic dodge, of saying that houses of justice/ spiritual assemblies are not “leaders of religion” and may therefore intervene in politics and even take over the civil State, is illogical and is put out of bounds by these texts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

This is not a dodge, it is based on what Abdu'l-Bahá Himself says. He defines in the *Risálih Siyásiyyih* why He does not think it advisable for religious leaders to intervene in politics. The following is from Cole's own translation:

These souls [religious leaders] are the authorities in establishing the purport of divine laws, not with regard to their implementation ... what expertise do they have in political matters, the protection of the subjects, the managing of serious affairs, the welfare and prosperity of the country, the implementation of the civil regulations and secular laws of a realm, or foreign affairs and domestic policy?

In other words, Abdu'l-Bahá wants them to remove themselves from the political sphere because their training is in other areas. This clearly does not apply to the Bahá'í institutions whose members have no training in religious law but who are elected from among the generality of people and thus resemble much more democratically elected local and national governments — people whom Abdu'l-Bahá obviously does think are suited to the task of government.

[end of email]