

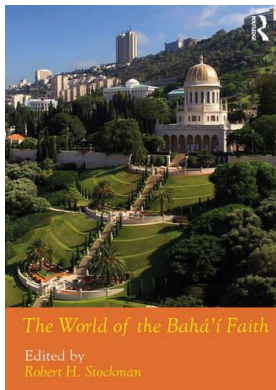
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE WRITINGS OF SHOGLI EFFENDI

Sandra Lynn Hutchison

Introduction

Spanning the better part of four decades, the English-language writings of Shoghi Effendi rival the works of any major twentieth-century theologian in their scope, elegance, and sheer volume and surpass those works in their claim to authority. As the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith and the religion's hereditary head, Shoghi Effendi was not simply the foremost theologian of the Bahá'í dispensation; he was the appointed 'expounder of the words of God' and the authoritative interpreter of Bahá'í scripture ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Will and Testament, 5). Shoghi Effendi's elucidations of the words revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, the Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, and by His Herald, the Báb, together with his commentary on the writings and utterances of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the appointed interpreter of the Bahá'í Writings before Shoghi Effendi, are viewed by Bahá'ís as 'statements of authoritative guidance' (Universal House of Justice, in Bergsmo 1991: 12). Similarly, his translations of Bahá'í scripture from Persian and Arabic into English are believed to carry an authority that sets them apart from other translations of works written by the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

Shoghi Effendi wrote only one book in the course of his thirty-six-year-long ministry; the bulk of his writings in English take the form of letters addressed to individuals and epistles addressed to a wider audience. Since he was steeped from childhood in the Bahá'í scriptural tradition, a tradition that is primarily epistolary in nature, it is not surprising that Shoghi Effendi favoured this genre for his writings. But while Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote their letters in Persian or Arabic on subjects central to the Bahá'í teachings, Shoghi Effendi wrote a large number of letters in English explaining how these teachings might be applied to the development of the Bahá'í community. Other subjects explored in his letters and epistles include the stations of the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith; the Covenant between God and the faithful believer; the laws, teachings, and social principles of the Bahá'í Faith; the character of Bahá'í administrative institutions; plans for sharing the Bahá'í teachings with others; the nature of the forces of social transformation at work in the modern age; and the cultivation of the spiritual life of the individual.

Shoghi Effendi achieved a remarkable range of expression within the epistolary genre, communicating guidance of a deeply personal nature to individuals; giving practical instructions to institutions and communities regarding administrative matters; and sending out calls to action, sometimes urgent, in the form of teaching plans to the community. He also used the telegram to communicate with the Bahá'í world, especially news of or praise for victories achieved by

the community. But whether private or public in nature, brief or lengthy, the intimate tone of Shoghi Effendi's communications, as evidenced by his unflinching praise for and encouragement of the Bahá'ís as well as by the warmth of his salutations and valedictions, calls to mind Paul's epistles to the early Christian communities.

Genre, style, and scope

Shoghi Effendi greatly admired the prose masters of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, writers such as Thomas Carlyle and Edward Gibbon, whose major work, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, he studied assiduously all his adult life. In its elevated diction and grand style, Shoghi Effendi's prose shares more in common with the prose of those essayists than with that of any writer of the modern period. Characterized by periodic sentences, rhetorical questions, a barrage of paratactical clauses, unusual usages, and archaic diction, and beautified by poetic elements, such as rhythm, sound, and imagery, Shoghi Effendi's elegant and often rhetorically charged prose communicates with an authority befitting the appointed head of a world religion whose goal it is to inspire, persuade, and move his readership to action. Replete as it is with rhetorical strategies and devices that raise it, when read aloud, to the level of powerful oratory, Shoghi Effendi's prose bears the mark of his intimate acquaintance not only with various eighteenth- and nineteenth-century prose masters in English but also with Christian and Islamic scriptural traditions. It is interesting to note that Shoghi Effendi composed his English writings after the Persian fashion, reading his work aloud as he wrote (Rabbání 1969: 197), and it is this method, together with the strength of his convictions and the authority conferred upon him by his station, that can be credited with generating a sonorous prose that is both elegant and deeply persuasive.

While a large number of his letters were written to individuals in response to questions about private matters—it is estimated about 26,000—or to particular administrative bodies or communities to offer guidance regarding community building, a few of Shoghi Effendi's written communications, most notably his wartime epistles, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939/1984), *The Promised Day Is Come* (1941), and the seven letters that were collected and published in a volume entitled *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (1938), were addressed to a broader readership and examined at length subjects of relevance to the community as a whole. While these communications were more public in nature and, therefore, widely circulated and published in Shoghi Effendi's lifetime, his letters to individuals and administrative bodies were, for the most part, read only by their recipients until, after Shoghi Effendi's passing, a number of these letters were compiled, on the basis of theme or the geographical location of their recipients, and published in book form. Since in the Bahá'í Faith, the truths embedded in letters or epistles written by the head of the faith to an individual, community, or institution are viewed as holding significance for the entire community, such compilations of letters have become an integral part of the body of the authoritative guidance given by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'í community in his role as Guardian.

The few compilations of Shoghi Effendi's writings that were published during his lifetime take on a special significance since, according to his wife, Rúhíyyih Rabbání (also known as Rúhíyyih *Khánum*), he was deeply involved throughout his ministry in the publication and dissemination of Bahá'í materials worldwide (Rabbání 1969: 206–208). Published in New York in 1928, a compilation entitled *Bahá'í Administration* points to Shoghi Effendi's concern in the early years of his ministry with ensuring that the Bahá'ís of the West had access to guidance regarding the nature of the administrative order he had charged them with building. A later compilation on the same theme, *Principles of Bahá'í Administration* (1950/1963/1973/1976), demonstrates his ongoing concern with ensuring that guidance on this subject was readily available. *The Selected Writings of Shoghi Effendi*, which was published in Wilmette, Illinois, in 1942,

gave English-speaking Bahá'ís a selection of key passages on various subjects of importance, and *Messages to America: Selected Letters and Cablegrams Addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America, 1932–1946*, which was published in Wilmette in 1947, brought together in a single volume the guidance Shoghi Effendi had offered the North American Bahá'ís in numerous letters and cables sent over the course of many years.

Major works

God Passes By

God Passes By, Shoghi Effendi's history of the first hundred years of the Bahá'í Faith, was published in 1944 to mark the centenary of the newly established religion. As Shoghi Effendi makes clear in his foreword to the book, he did not intend to write 'a detailed history of the last hundred years of the Bahá'í Faith'; rather, he wished to offer 'a review of the salient features of its birth and rise, as well as the initial stages in the establishment of its administrative institutions' (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* xiii). Against the backdrop of an age in decline and a humanity in travail as a result of its rejection of the world-unifying teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi presents a vision of a century characterized by an orderly and purposeful unfolding of events that is purely providential in its impact on the growth and development of the Bahá'í Faith, a century that has witnessed the end of what he describes as 'the Heroic, the Primitive, the Apostolic Age of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh' and the beginning of 'the Formative, the Transitional, the Iron Age' (*God Passes By* xiii). In his view, the first century of the Bahá'í Faith is one in which can be seen

unmistakable evidences of a slowly maturing process, or an orderly development, of internal consolidation, of external expansion, of a gradual emancipation from the fetters of religious orthodoxy, and of a corresponding diminution of civil disabilities and restrictions.

(*God Passes By* xvi)

Although Shoghi Effendi chose not to encumber his history with citations, *God Passes By* is a scholarly work with respect to the depth and range of research that served as its foundation. According to Rúhíyyih Rabbání, before writing this history, Shoghi Effendi read not only all the Bahá'í Writings in Persian and English—over a hundred volumes—but also more than two hundred books about or containing substantial references to the Bahá'í Faith (Rabbání 1969: 223). However, *God Passes By* is not a history in the conventional sense of the term. As a member of the family of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi was not a dispassionate observer of the events about which he was writing; rather, he was a participant in and eye witness to history in the making. Moreover, as the head of the Bahá'í Faith, he was concerned not only with recording the past but also with shaping the future. To this end, he wrote what might be described as visionary history—history that invokes the greatness of the past in order to inspire future greatness. What Rúhíyyih Rabbání describes as 'a veritable essence of essences' from which 'fifty books could easily be written' (Rabbání 1969: 196), *God Passes By* is a rich, compelling, and, given the plethora of detail it embraces, remarkably cogent account of the first Bahá'í century, made so by the capacity of Shoghi Effendi, as the head and prime mover of the developing religion and as the visionary responsible for imagining its future, to grasp the significance of the events of the first Bahá'í century and to see a pattern of growth in them. According to Rúhíyyih

Rabbání, the ability to ‘pluck . . . the significance of an occurrence, an isolated phenomenon, from the welter of irrelevancies associated with the international development of the Cause and set it in its historical frame’ so that readers could ‘understand what was taking place and what it signified’ was one of the features of Shoghi Effendi’s genius (Rabbání 1969: 208).

The Advent of Divine Justice and The Promised Day Is Come

Two of Shoghi Effendi’s epistles, *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939/1984) and *The Promised Day Is Come* (1941/1980), are so lengthy, so polished, and so rhetorically driven that they are more properly viewed as epistolary treatises. The epistolary treatise is a genre employed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Secret of Divine Civilization, in which He addresses Iranian leaders and intellectuals of His day regarding the pressing matter of social reform in the country. It is in the same spirit of engaging his readers in the process of social transformation that Shoghi Effendi addresses the American Bahá’ís in *The Advent of Divine Justice* (1939/1984). Written during the year Shoghi Effendi spent in Europe due to the terrorist threat in Palestine (Rabbání 1969: 219), *The Advent of Divine Justice* sets forth, for the first time in his writings, the role of the North American Bahá’í community as ‘prime mover and pattern of the future communities which the Faith of Bahá’u’lláh is destined to raise up’ (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 5). Referring to the North American Bahá’ís as ‘the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age’ who will ‘by living sacrifice’ fulfill their heroic mission, and to the North American Bahá’í community as ‘the one chief remaining citadel’ and ‘the cradle, as well as the stronghold, of that future New World Order’, Shoghi Effendi clearly establishes the primacy of this community in the spread of the Bahá’í teachings worldwide and in the renovation of American society at home (*Advent* 5–6). Citing racial prejudice as ‘the most vital and challenging issue’, he calls the North American Bahá’ís to a ‘double crusade’: first, to regenerate the inward life of their own community by means of ‘three spiritual prerequisites’—‘moral rectitude’, ‘absolute chastity’, and ‘complete freedom from prejudice’—and, next, ‘to assail the long-standing evils that have entrenched themselves in the life of their nation’ (*Advent* 28–34).

In *The Promised Day Is Come* (1941/1980), Shoghi Effendi takes as his theme ‘the world-afflicting ordeal’ that has come as ‘a judgment of God pronounced upon the peoples of the earth, who, for a century, have refused to recognize the One Whose advent had been promised by all religions’ (*Promised* 111). Shoghi Effendi lays the responsibility for ‘[t]his great retributive calamity’ squarely at the feet of the rulers and ecclesiastical leaders who persecuted the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh and rejected their claims (112). But as Shoghi Effendi makes clear, this calamity is providential: ‘It is not only a retributory and destructive fire, but a disciplinary and creative process, whose aim is the salvation, through unification, of the entire planet’ (116). ‘God’, he explains, ‘chastises because He is just, and He chastens because He loves’ (115).

Written, respectively, amidst ‘the catastrophic rumblings’ that preceded the outbreak of World War II and in the midst of that same war, *The Advent of Divine Justice* and *The Promised Day Is Come* no doubt draw some of their urgency and fiery rhetoric from the spirit of the times. However, the vision and style of these two epistles have scriptural precedents as well, conjuring as they do a vision of the day foretold in the Bible and the Qur’an on which God would bring forth a retributive calamity to purify and reorient humanity and so prepare it to fulfil the purpose ordained for it in this, ‘the promised day’: namely, the renewal of civilization. Gifted with a strong intuitive sense and a master of the language to which he had devoted years of study, Shoghi Effendi understood how to reach a given audience at a given time and was able to modify his voice and adapt his tone accordingly. In writing to the North American Bahá’ís in these two wartime epistles, therefore, he sounds the same note of alarm that resonates throughout those books of the Bible that touch

upon the theme of an apocalyptic end-time, even as he evokes the myths of newness and exceptionalism embedded in the continent's beginnings (Hutchison 1997: 13–23).

The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh

Special attention should be given to a series of letters addressed to the Bahá'ís of North America and the West, also epistolary treatises, that were conceived and written between 1929 and 1936 and subsequently published in 1938 as *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. Often referred to as the 'World Order letters', these epistles are seminal works in Shoghi Effendi's oeuvre because of their detailed exposition of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of world order, a vision that Shoghi Effendi presented to the North American Bahá'í community at a critical point in its work of developing the precursor to that world order: the Bahá'í administrative order. Dated 7 February 1929 and addressed to the Bahá'ís of Canada and the United States, 'The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh', the first letter in the series, was written in response to a disturbance in the Bahá'í community caused by a prominent American believer who challenged some of the provisions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will. In both this epistle and a subsequent one addressed to the Bahá'ís of the West and entitled 'The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Further Considerations' (21 March 1930), Shoghi Effendi explains the nature of the institutions that will serve as the framework of Bahá'u'lláh's world order, draws attention to the purpose animating them, and highlights some of the key social principles that will play a role in shaping and fortifying them.

Marking the tenth anniversary of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi's third epistle in this series, 'The Goal of a New World Order' (November 28, 1931), provides guidance to the Bahá'í community regarding how to respond to the escalating social crises of the day. Offering an analysis of world affairs that is both penetrating and astute, this epistle is exemplary in its correlation of the Bahá'í teachings with contemporary social issues. Addressed to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, the fourth and fifth epistles included in the volume, 'The Golden Age of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh' (21 March 1932) and 'America and the Most Great Peace' (21 April 1933), point to the key role of the North American Bahá'í community in the unfoldment of Bahá'u'lláh's world order, touch upon the stations of the Founders of the Bahá'í Faith, elucidate the meaning of 'Divine Polity' in the Bahá'í context, and distinguish the Bahá'í dispensation from previous religious dispensations (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 64).

Addressed to the Bahá'ís of the West, the sixth epistle in this collection, 'The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh' (8 February 1932), is a key work in Shoghi Effendi's oeuvre; in it, he offers 'an exposition of the fundamental verities of the Faith', verities that had not been fully grasped by the then fledgling North American Bahá'í community. In this epistle, Shoghi Effendi elucidates as never before the stations of the three Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith, their relationships to one another, and the divine origin of the Bahá'í Administrative Order. In a final epistle addressed to the Bahá'ís of the West and entitled 'The Unfoldment of World Civilization' (11 March 1936), Shoghi Effendi identifies a twofold process of integration and disintegration at work in modern society and offers a stirring vision of the coming World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, the basic framework of which it is the purpose of the seven epistles included in this volume to describe.

Translations

Due to his station as the appointed interpreter of the Bahá'í Writings, Shoghi Effendi's contribution to the translation of the Persian and Arabic writings of the three Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith is not only significant but also entirely unique. In the words of the Universal House of Justice:

‘the beloved Guardian was not only a translator but the inspired interpreter of the Holy Writings’ (Universal House of Justice 1992). And while Shoghi Effendi anticipated future translations of works not yet available in English, Bahá’ís believe that he was uniquely endowed with the capacity to draw authoritative meaning from the Persian and Arabic writings he translated. His station, together with his remarkable mastery not only of the two languages of revelation—Persian and Arabic—but also of English, the language of translation, place his translations in a separate category from other translations completed during the years of his ministry, from any translations undertaken since his passing, and from any translations that will be undertaken in future.

Shoghi Effendi’s command of Persian and Arabic far exceeds what he would have gained growing up in a Persian- and Arabic-speaking family. Translating the Bahá’í Writings into English requires not only a high level of mastery of three different languages but also the literary skill to render richly poetic scriptural texts, such as *The Hidden Words*, a work for which there is no equivalent form in the English literary tradition (Malouf 1997: 64). It is well known that, as an adult, Shoghi Effendi was enamoured of the English language, and, according to at least one account, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was well aware of the importance of English to the future growth and development of the Faith and so personally oversaw Shoghi Effendi’s training in the language, from childhood all the way through to his studies at Balliol College in Oxford, England (Rabbání 1969: 12).

Dated 25 February 1922 and addressed to the ‘beloved of God and the handmaids of the Merciful throughout the United States’, *The Will and Testament of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, a document in which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá outlines some of the basic features of the world order first articulated by Bahá’u’lláh in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, including the appointment of a Guardian from the line of His descendants, was the first translation of the Bahá’í Writings from Persian into English completed by Shoghi Effendi after his assumption of the Guardianship. For all the years of his ministry thereafter, he made the translation of Bahá’í scriptures into English a high priority among his many tasks and responsibilities as head of the religion. Shoghi Effendi’s next published translation was of Bahá’u’lláh’s *The Hidden Words*, which he sent to the American Bahá’ís in February 1923. He revised his translation of this work in 1924, 1929, and 1954, seeking assistance in his revision of the 1929 version from two Bahá’ís from the British Isles, Ethel Rosenberg and George Townshend, the latter of whom collaborated with Shoghi Effendi on a number of subsequent translations.

In 1930, Shoghi Effendi completed his first major translation, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán* or *The Book of Certitude*, in which Bahá’u’lláh explains the station and role of the Manifestations of God who have intervened periodically in human history. A key work of Bahá’í theology, Shoghi Effendi ranked the book as ‘[f]oremost among the priceless treasures cast forth from the billowing ocean of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation’ (*God Passes By* 138). This translation was followed in 1932 by Shoghi Effendi’s translation from the Persian of the first part of a history of the Bábí Faith by Nabil-i-A’zam, a well-known follower and contemporary of the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh. A seminal history of the Bábí Faith, *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil’s Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá’í Revelation* tells the story of the Bábí movement from its inception to 1853. This book, in the estimation of Rúhíyyih Rabbání, ‘deserves to be counted as a classic among epic narratives in the English tongue’ (Rabbání 1969: 215).

In 1935, Shoghi Effendi offered Western Bahá’ís what he himself described as ‘a selection of the most characteristic and hitherto unpublished passages from the outstanding works of the Author of the Bahá’í Revelation’ (Rabbání 1969: 218). A compilation on which Shoghi Effendi had been working since his appointment as Guardian, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* consists of a selection of key passages from Bahá’u’lláh’s writings, including excerpts from *Kitáb-i-Íqán*. Published in 1938, *Prayers and Meditations of Bahá’u’lláh* is a kind of companion volume, offering a broad selection of prayers and meditations—186 in all—to be used in devotional life.

In 1942, before turning his attention to the development of the Administrative Order and the implementation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s teaching plans, Shoghi Effendi translated one more major work by Baha’u’llah: Epistle to the Son of the Wolf. Addressed to Shaykh Muḥammad-Taqíy-i-Najafí, a prominent Muslim cleric who had persecuted the Bahá’ís, this epistle is Bahá’u’lláh’s final work and contains selections He made, during the last two years of His life, of key passages from His own writings.

In order to convey its lofty themes with appropriate dignity and to retain the poetic richness and elevated tone of Bahá’í scripture in its original languages, Shoghi Effendi turned away from modern English and the language of everyday speech to a more literary brand of English that, because of its use of archaisms, poetic diction, and biblical language, specifically the language of the King James version of the Bible, might best be described as Victorian (Malouf 1997: 101). Drawing upon the kind of poetic diction and prosody current among poets and translators of the nineteenth century—Victorians such as Tennyson and Matthew Arnold, as well as translators such as Edward Fitzgerald, who introduced Western readers to the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*; J.M. Rodwell, who translated the Qur’an; and Edward Granville Browne, who undertook the first translations of the Bahá’í Writings—the style of English chosen by Shoghi Effendi for his translations of Bahá’í scripture draws upon archaic pronouns, such as ‘thee’ and ‘thy’; archaic verb forms, such as ‘hath’ and ‘doeth’; and inverted syntax, all of which are among the distinguishing features of the English used in the King James Bible.

Conclusion

In evaluating the contribution of Shoghi Effendi’s English writings to the development of the Bahá’í community worldwide, it is important to note that the Bahá’í Faith grew exponentially as a world religion during the years of his ministry, with functioning communities governed by administrative bodies established in all parts of the globe by the time of his passing in 1957. Replete with practical instructions for community building, with exhortations regarding personal conduct, and with encouragement to the Bahá’ís to hold fast to the program of individual and social transformation outlined in their scriptures, Shoghi Effendi’s letters and epistles have long inspired and uplifted their readers. A repository of scriptural commentary and personal encouragement, the English-language writings of Shoghi Effendi continue to enrich the spiritual lives of English-speaking Bahá’ís, educate them about the teachings of their religion, and guide them with respect to the character of the administrative bodies they are striving to build. As important, Shoghi Effendi’s masterful translations have given the Bahá’ís of the West access to a large corpus of writings by the Central Figures of the Bahá’í Faith, writings to which they can turn in their daily lives and in the governance of their communities. In conclusion, Shoghi Effendi’s labours over the thirty-six years of his ministry have provided the worldwide Bahá’í community with a firm foundation upon which to build in the centuries to come.

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